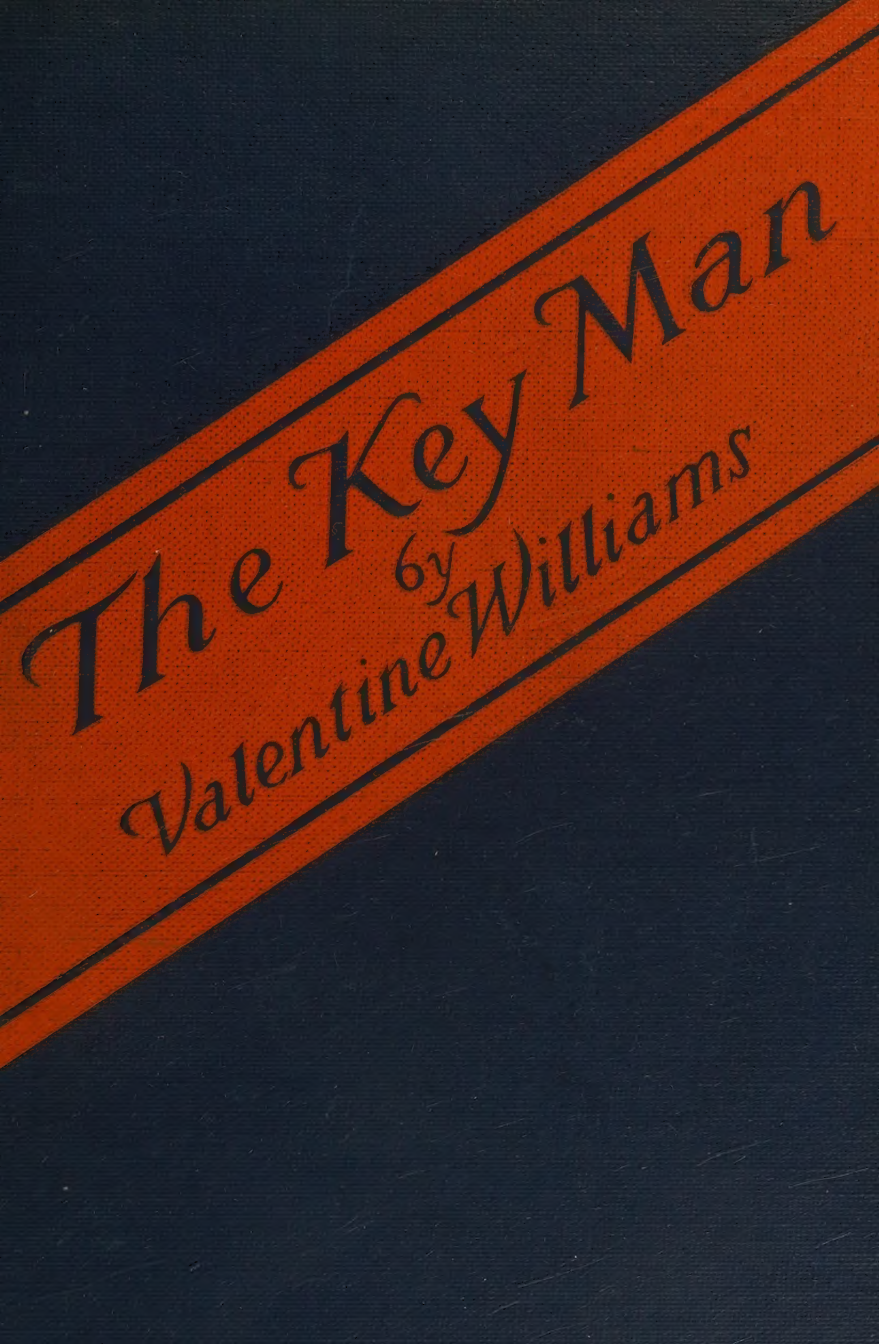




The Key Man
by
Valentine Williams

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VALENTINE WILLIAMS

AUTHOR OF
THE MAN WITH THE CLUBFOOT,
MR. RAMOSI, ETC.



GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

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THE KEY MAN



CHAPTER I

THE WEDDING NIGHT

WHILE dinner lasted, and for as long as Baptiste was present, they were correct and formal. Their talk was of indifferent things, of the run from Paris in the new car, of the lawn-tennis court they were going to lay down at the cottage, of Marcia Greer's delightful house. The candles in their silver candelabra burned sleekly in the warm night air, and beyond the screen of high elms bordering the distant road an immense white moon, hung above the unseen river, seemed to smile benignly upon the girl and the man as they sat at table under the stars.

But when the butler, having served the coffee and liqueurs, had disappeared through the open French windows into the silent villa, Sally leaned across the table and laid her small, cool hand on Rex Garrett's wrist. He put aside the cigar he had been about to light and dropped his free hand over hers. Thus, for a little while, they remained without speaking, hands clasped, while about them May night sent forth its muted sounds.

They had dined very late. Content to be at last alone, they had lingered long over dinner, revelling in the cool, dew-soaked hush of the great garden after the noise and heat of Paris, the excitement of their wedding day. The squat belfry of the village church across the Seine had long since chimed out eleven o'clock; yet they sat on, looking into one another's eyes, heedless of the coffee's furious bubbling in its glass cylinder, while the winged

companions of the summer night fluttered their dance of death about the trembling candle-flames and, in the marshy flats beside the river, the frogs rasped out their rhythmic chorus. From time to time the faint barking of dogs, the distant whistle of a train, came to their ears; or, from the Paris road beyond the Seine, the swelling note of a belated car cut across the stillness.

It was Sally who broke the silence between them with a soft sigh.

'Rex,' she said, 'it's funny, but I feel to-night as though you were almost a stranger . . .'

Affectionately his eyes smiled back into hers.

'We've only known each other two months,' he rejoined. 'But I feel as though I'd known you all my life . . .'

In a little gasping ejaculation, she breathed out her delight.

'O-oh, truly?'

'For every lonely, barren second of the thirty-one years I've been waiting for you . . .'

She gave his hand a little squeeze.

'That's dear of you. I wanted to hear you say something like that. The first time I ever saw you, that night on the Esterel . . .'

He sighed happily.

'That wonderful night! When I came upon you weeping over your car . . .'

'I wasn't weeping . . .'

'Your face was wet . . .'

'That was the rain . . .'

'You looked so absolutely forlorn I wanted to take you in my arms and comfort you. When we parted that night I felt as though we were old friends . . .'

She smiled at him across the table.

‘So did I. But that’s not what I meant. When I told Marcia that you’d asked me to marry you, she warned me that marriage is a great experiment . . .’

He laughed.

‘It seems to be nowadays. Your friend Mrs. Pangbourne is having her third try, isn’t she?’

‘Now you’re being frivolous,’ she reproved him. ‘But Marcia was quite serious. People who marry, she told me, have to realise that each is going to make the acquaintance of an entirely new person. I guess that’s about right, and . . . well, it scares me a little. I wonder if I’m going to go on loving you . . . and you me.’

Her avowal had deepened the rose-leaf pinkness of her cheeks so that it was as though the clear-cut oval of her face were bathed in a faintly rosy light. Under the cold rays of the moon, with her short hair, yellow as mountain honey but shining like freshly minted gold, brushed in a deep wave across her smooth forehead, her frank eyes of Mediterranean blue, her exquisite tint, she was like a flower plucked from the midsummer glory of an English garden.

Everything about her was fine, fine as the strands of her gleaming hair, the texture of her skin, the slender grace of her hands, the slimness of her ankles and feet. So brilliant was her colouring that, but for the character her face revealed, she might have been one of those mannequins of wax whose imperishable radiance brightens the windows of the great department stores. But high mettle, with a touch of self-will, was disclosed in the curve of the nostrils, the chin’s firm moulding; and the azure eyes, long-fringed, were wide open and intelligent. And she was young with a lissom body beautifully

formed, radiating, as the sun sheds light, health and happiness and eagerness.

She was eager now, with the rather terrible eagerness of a woman in love, as she sat and faced her husband across the purring coffee-machine. He leaned forward, his head bent back a little, with his heart gazing at her out of his eyes.

'I loved you that first night I saw you,' he answered. 'And I shall always love you. And if I ever stop loving you, I shall tell you, as I know you'd tell me. We must always be honest with one another, Sally. I always think that half the unhappiness in marriage comes from deceit. The very first thing I liked about you was your truthful eyes . . . '

Her colour heightened suddenly, and she looked away.

'I don't worry really about us,' she said. 'I believe I'm going to be tremendously happy with you, dear. But Marcia meant it for the best. She's been so good to me, Rex . . . '

He nodded. 'I know. She's a wonderful friend.'

'She wanted us to start things right. She loathes Paris, yet she insisted on going up and staying there for the fortnight so that we could have the villa to ourselves, because, she said, Les Ormes would be more homey for our honeymoon than a hotel. She's determined we shall be happy. Do you know'—she hesitated, glancing rather anxiously at his face—'do you know, she even sent me a last word of advice in a telegram?'

'What, here?'

Sally nodded. 'Baptiste brought it up when I was having my bath before dinner.'

'Aren't you going to let me in on this?'

She laughed rather nervously.

‘Later on, perhaps. You must have your coffee now.’ She withdrew her hand. ‘And Marcia said particularly that you were to try the Napoleon brandy. We’re very proud of it at Les Ormes.’ She passed over the coffee-cup, then filled one of the liqueur glasses from the bottle with its seal of green wax flaunting the proud “N” of the Emperor.

Rex took the cup, his eyes on her face.

‘Even now,’ he suggested, gently mocking, ‘you haven’t told me the whole reason for your being scared . . .’

She flashed him a look of interrogation.

‘You’re asking yourself: “Have I done right in marrying this man of whom I know nothing . . .?”’

‘Oh, it’s not true,’ she broke in indignantly. ‘I won’t have you say such things. All I care to know about you I know. I know what you did in the war—I made Rupert Forsdyke tell me about your serving all through it as a Tommy—and I know you’re a very good artist, for the Luxembourg doesn’t buy dud pictures . . .’

‘You know nothing about my people . . .’

She made a grimace. ‘The in-laws! Oh, Rex, I’m so glad that you and I haven’t any . . .’

‘And you’ve omitted from your summary of my life the fact, which all your friends will pick on, that I once served with the Foreign Legion . . .’

‘That’s no disgrace . . .’

‘Some people think it is. I don’t speak of it now. I’m tired of explaining that I joined up, after the war, of my own free will because I had no money and wanted to go back East to paint . . .’

‘You’ve got your desert pictures to silence them,’ she said indignantly. Her voice softened. ‘But what I meant was that I know all I want to know about the man

I've married. You played your part in the war, you've got genius . . .'

He threw up his eyes. 'Genius, ye gods! A trick of paint . . . and not always that . . . !'

' . . . And you love me.' She was suddenly wistful. 'What else matters? I've no doubt you've been in love dozens of times before, if that's what you mean.' She made a face at him. 'But you needn't think I want to hear about your old conquests.'

He laughed and shook his head. He was as dark as she was fair, with a proud, rather lean face, and crisp black hair, close-cropped, which was brushed back in two waves from his forehead.

'There weren't any, Sally, darling. I never had what they call a feminine influence in my life before I met you . . .'

She gave him a mischievous look.

'They say that's what all men tell their wives . . .'

'I don't want you to believe I'm better than the rest of men,' he replied seriously. 'But I can assure you quite honestly that I've had a roughish life, my dear, always among men. The greatest friend I ever had was a man . . .'

'It sounds very lonely,' she put in.

'No,' he corrected gravely, 'I had my painting. It's only since I met you that I've begun to realise how much I've missed . . .'

'You said that very nicely,' she said approvingly, 'for a man who has never had the chance of finding out for himself that women adore adroit compliments.' She patted his hand. 'Never mind, darling, I like you very much as you are . . .'

Thoughtfully he sliced the ash from the end of his

cigar. 'You trust me, I know,' he replied. 'But I wasn't thinking of you, Sally. I was thinking of your friends.'

He drained his coffee-cup and put it down. She laughed. 'Except Marcia, all my friends are in America. I haven't got any friends — real friends, I mean — over here ...'

'Acquaintances, then. They're going to be rather hipped at your going off to church and having a wedding all on your own. People like your Mrs. Pangbourne and — what's that ghastly woman called? — Mrs. Litzbold, regard the weddings of their friends, with orange blossom, bridesmaids, and "The Voice That Breath'd," as part of their legitimate social perks ...'

Sally's silvery laugh rang out. 'It's perfectly true! Rex, they'll be mad ...'

'You bet they'll be mad. Can't you hear them, Sally? "Of course, Sara's a charming girl, but this Garrett person!" "My dear! A man she doesn't know from Adam! They say he was in the Foreign Legion! Of course, he's an adventurer after her money ...!"'

'What nonsense you talk!' Sally put in rather hastily. 'What does it matter what they say?'

Rex sipped his brandy.

'Still,' he remarked, 'the fact remains that actually you know very little about me and that Mrs. Pangbourne and all the rest of 'em will be right. I want to tell you something about my life ...'

With a quick gesture she laid her hand on his. Her eyes had a hunted look.

'Listen, dear,' she said. 'It's nothing I have to hear, is it?'

'How do you mean?' His voice was puzzled.

'It's nothing that's going to upset our marriage. You

aren't going to tell me you've got a wife already, or anything like that?'

'Good Lord, no!' He began to laugh. But then he saw how pale she had gone. He pushed back his chair and, coming round the table, put his arms about her. 'Sally, darling,' he said, 'you're trembling. I never realised you cared so much...'

'Oh, Rex,' she answered brokenly, 'I do care most desperately. Why did you scare me so? It's nothing disgraceful you have to tell me, is it?'

Of a sudden his face was sombre. 'Nothing that I could help,' he answered.

'Then keep it until after,' she said. 'To-night... now, I have a confession to make.'

A line of perplexity barred his forehead as he watched her thrust a hand into the bosom of her glistening white evening frock. She produced the blue oblong of a French telegram.

'Marcia's wire,' she said, and gave it to him.

CHAPTER II

THE CONFESSION

HE looked at her, twisting the telegram between his fingers.

‘Do I really have to read this?’ he asked with a comic air of resignation.

‘Please!’ she said, so earnestly that he grew serious. He unfolded the message. It ran:

Much better let him find out truth for himself. Love.

MARCIA.

The French telegraphist had made a sad hash of the unfamiliar Anglo-Saxon handwriting. ‘Truth’ was printed ‘turth.’ The mutilation gave the whole message a sinister and monstrous appearance.

But Rex Garrett’s face was unchanged as he handed the blue form back to the girl.

‘See here, Sally,’ he said gently, ‘I don’t want to hear anything you don’t care about telling me...’

‘Let’s go down into the garden,’ she proposed.

He spread her scarf of silver lace about her shoulders and in silence they descended the shallow steps. With a little comforting gesture he slipped his arm about her waist. Very close together they threaded a small firm path that wound its way among fragrant flower-beds to a sunken fish-pond in the centre of the garden.

‘Rex,’ said the girl suddenly as they went along, ‘how much money do you suppose I’ve got?’

‘Lord,’ he laughed, ‘I haven’t the remotest idea! I never thought about it...’

‘No, but how much do you think?’

He stopped. 'My dear Sara,' he remarked with mock gravity, 'I do hope you're not going to tell me that you're a female millionaire. Millionaires are so vulgar, and they can't digest their food...'

'Don't make fun of me,' she entreated wistfully. 'Answer my question!'

'My dear,' he said soothingly, 'it's a silly question. Any money you've got of your own will be in the way of pocket money. It does not concern me. You know I earn enough for both of us...'

'I have my reasons for asking,' she insisted. 'When we met at Cannes that time, did you think I was well off?'

His shoulders moved in a little shrug.

'I did, I suppose. I don't know much about women's clothes, but I can see that yours are expensive. And one can't live for nothing a day at the Carlton at Cannes, either. And you had your car, too...'

'How much do you think I've got a year?'

He jerked his shoulders up again.

'Two or three thousand pounds, at least, if you ask me...'

Very slowly she bowed her head.

'Rex,' she said, 'I haven't played straight with you. I'm a common fraud. I let you think I was rich. I'm not. Marcia paid for my clothes. That car was Marcia's. I haven't a penny piece except the salary she gave me. And now, of course, that's stopped...'

They had come to the fish-pond where, in the placid water striated by the light of the moon, the fat red carp hung motionless in the depths.

'Salary?' he repeated. 'But you told me Marcia was your chaperon!'

‘It was a lie,’ she said with a little catch in her throat. ‘I was her paid companion!’

‘I see!’ he answered slowly.

She broke into hasty, disjointed explanation.

‘I was a saleswoman at a dress-shop in New York, at Madame Clémentine’s, on Fifty-Fifth Street. Marcia used to get frocks there. She took a fancy to me and offered to take me to Europe. She said she’d give me a salary and buy my clothes and . . . and treat me like a friend and not a paid servant. That was nearly two years ago. When I look back, I think I was a coward to accept her offer. But she was kind and I was so deathly tired of the struggle to earn my own living . . .’ She paused. ‘And it is a struggle, with thousands of beautiful and talented girls swarming every year into New York; and when one is penniless, one loses one’s nerve . . .’

‘I know!’ he said gently, his eyes on her face.

‘And I was penniless, and almost friendless. I told you all my people were dead. I never knew my mother; and my father died after his business failed. After that I had to leave Richmond, in the South, where we Candlins have always lived. We were of good Southern stock and the life Marcia offered me, travel, nice frocks, meeting interesting people, is the sort of life I might have had if Daddy hadn’t lost his money . . .’

Rex’s voice interrupted her.

‘Listen, Sally,’ he said. ‘Why are you telling me all this now? Why didn’t you follow Marcia’s advice?’

She evaded his question.

‘Marcia wanted me to make a rich marriage. She was for ever dinning it into me. I think she had a title in mind too. She was always introducing men. But I

never met a man I wanted to marry until I met you ...'

He laughed rather grimly.

'You must have disappointed your friend,' he said.

She threw him a piteous look.

'Oh, Rex,' she pleaded wearily, 'don't be unkind to me! I never intended to deceive you. It didn't occur to me that, seeing the way we were living, you might believe I was rich. It was something Marcia said that first made me realise you thought I had money of my own ...' Nervously she twisted her hands together. 'Marcia was very angry with me for falling in love with you. But when she saw that my mind was made up, she wouldn't let me tell you the truth. I think her idea was ...' She broke off; and her blue eyes anxiously searched his face.

'What?' he demanded bluntly.

'I think,' Sally answered slowly, 'she wanted to test you to see if you would question her about my means. That was why she let you believe she was my chaperon. She made me bear her out ...'

He was standing away from her now, his tall form in evening clothes merging into the background of dark foliage. His face was severe, haggard almost, and he kept stubbing his foot irresolutely against the marble base of the fountain.

'I can make allowances for Marcia,' he said at last. 'You were in her care; it was her right. But you! Why couldn't you have told me the truth?'

Her face was flaming now. Once more she let his question go by unanswered.

'You must have seen how stand-offish Marcia was at first. It was only when you told her about the life insurance you were settling on me, after you had asked me to marry you, that she became friendly. I wanted to own

up then, but she wouldn't let me. She was scared; she saw she had gone too far, I think. She told me that, when you discovered how you'd been deceived, you were the sort of man who'd break off our engagement and go away . . .'

Her head was bent and she was staring at her silver shoe, turning the point this way and that to catch the moonbeams. He put his hands on her shoulders and made her look up at him.

'Did you believe that, too?' he asked.

She faltered and dropped her eyes.

'I was afraid . . .' she whispered.

'You wanted to be on the safe side, is that it?'

'It's your right to say such things'—the little gasp she gave sounded like a sob — 'but you make it hard for me to explain . . .' She loosed his hands from her shoulders and stood away from him. From the far distance the very faint drumming of a motor-car welled up to them out of the darkness.

'I shouldn't have said that,' he said quickly. 'I didn't mean to wound you, dear. But I hate deceit, and from you . . .' — a look of pain crept into his eyes — 'it hurts.' He raised her hand and began to stroke the slim, white fingers. 'And I don't understand you, either. Why have you told me this to-night? After all, we're married; any other time would have done as well . . .'

Her voice was low as, with eyes downcast, she answered:

'I was weak before. I gave way to Marcia. But I warned her I would speak to-night. That's why she wired me . . .'

She lifted her starry eyes to his.

'When I give myself to you to-night,' she whispered,

‘I want to give myself wholly. You must know me and love me for what I am . . .’

‘I loved you from the beginning because I knew you,’ he answered simply. ‘Do you think what you’ve told me about the money will make any difference, Sally?’ He put his arm about her and drew her to him. Her hands were on the lapels of his coat and she rested her face against them.

‘Can’t you guess,’ she whispered, ‘why I let Marcia persuade me? All these two months that I’ve loved you I’ve tried to have the courage to tell you the truth. When I was alone I used to promise myself I would, but as soon as I looked into your face my resolution always failed me. Oh, Rex, I was terrified lest you’d go away and leave me . . .’

‘Then you doubted me, too?’ His voice had grown suddenly hard.

Appealingly she looked up at him.

‘Only because I didn’t know you,’ she said. ‘I never thought you cared anything about the money, but I couldn’t be sure how much you wanted me. You were different from all the other men I have known, so proud, so lonely, so . . . so hard to understand.’

He had dropped his arms to his sides and was staring away from her into the darkness.

‘Oh, Rex,’ she pleaded, ‘I never really doubted. But I couldn’t bear to think that I might lose you; I felt my heart would break if you should go away. Take me in your arms again, beloved, and tell me you’ve forgiven me. Don’t spoil our wedding night!’

Across the river, beyond the double bridge, the village clock began to strike. They listened in silence, there in the moonlit garden, until the last of the twelve strokes

had ceased to sing and quiver in the still air. As the last stroke died away, the rapid hammering of a motor-car swelling to a crescendo as it topped a ridge mounted out of the dark distance.

Rex turned and looked at his bride. She stood there like a wraith in the moonlight, the lines of bright pearls on her ivory satin frock flashing in the soft rays. So silvery pale was she that she might have been a pixie that had stolen out of the glassy waters of the basin to bask in the splendour of the night.

She was gazing into the fountain, her long lashes glistening, her lips trembling, her young bosom rising and falling swiftly.

‘This night is ours,’ she said. ‘Take my love, Rex. It’s all I have to bring you.’

She lifted her shining eyes to his and on that he cried out her name and gathered her up in his arms. Her breath was warm on his cheek, the subtle fragrance of her enveloped him, her soft, yielding lips were pressed to his, all the lissom body of her was limp in his grasp. A cloud passed over the moon and, like an inky cloak, the scented gloom of the big garden fell about them, while out of the velvety night the frogs croaked their melancholy complaine to the glittering congregation of the stars. Above their hoarse complaint, the harsh stutter of the distant car, louder and more regular now, rose and fell upon the breeze.

His tenderness restored her confidence.

‘I’ve had a frightened feeling all the evening,’ she murmured as she hung with her arms about his neck, ‘as if some disaster were impending. But it goes away when you hold me like this. Oh, Rex, be good to me. I love you so . . .’

The melancholy hoot of a Klaxon horn, muted by distance, echoed from afar.

He bent to her lips again. Mercifully Fate, which is kind as often as it is cruel, hid the dark future from their eyes. But, even so, she clung to him desperately as though divining how many weary, anguishing days must pass before he would hold her in his arms again.

At last she detached herself from his embrace.

‘I’m going in,’ she said. ‘I’ll give you five minutes to finish your cigar. You’ll not be longer, will you? I shan’t be happy while you’re away from me to-night!’

She kissed the tips of her fingers to him and crying out ‘Five minutes!’ ran up the path towards the villa. The moon, peering gleefully out from behind a snowy cloud mass, showered her with silver as she sped to the bridal chamber.

The rhythmic beat of the motor-car was now a constant sound above the chorus of the frogs.

CHAPTER III

THE DISCOVERY

SALLY took the leather-bound book out of the dressing-bag that had been her husband's wedding gift to her and carried it across to the table before the mirror. On coming in from the garden she had slipped out of her clothes and pulled on a white-and-gold kimono over her nightdress of sea-green *crêpe de chine*. Seated at the mirror, whose shaded electric candles were the only illuminant of the big grey bedroom, she had creamed her face and brushed out her shining mop of hair. Now she returned to the dressing-table, the volume under her arm.

This book was her diary — 'Sally's Log,' Marcia called it — and the name was stamped upon the cover. On their departure for Europe, a year and a half before, Marcia had insisted that Sally should keep a diary. But, conscious of the fate of the majority of such good resolutions, Marcia had limited Sally to a period of only two years. She had ordered this journal specially at Brentano's, two years bound up together in one volume, so that the wane of the year, at least, might furnish the diarist with no excuse for slackness.

Sally's Log was the queerest jumble of facts and dates and quotations and reminders, interspersed with rare flashes of self-revealing candour. Much of its stern practicalities would have horrified Victorian misses. Those indefatigable self-analysts would have turned its pages in vain to discover such intimate outpourings of soul as they were wont to confide to 'dear Diary.' But

each day had its entry; for Sally's principle — and, as her story will make clear, she was a determined young woman — was to write something, if only a line, every night before she went to bed.

Thus, the names of guests at a party would be followed by a page on which an epigram from a new book sparkled in solitary splendour. Such a note as *15 miles per gall. to-day. See garage about carburettor*' would neighbour an entry: '*L. called. Why do the men I most dislike always try and make love to me?*' Rarely did the diarist let herself go; and the page which the Log allotted to each day was almost invariably too long for the chronicle of her doings, and her comments, often drily humorous, on people and things.

With a little key she took from her bag she unlocked the book — no human eye except hers, not even Marcia's, had ever looked inside — and opened it at the day of the month, May 27th, her wedding day. Then, as if moved by a sudden impulse, she fluttered the pages backward until she found a date earlier in the year. The date was March 17th. Fondly she smiled to herself as she scanned the entry there:

An adventure. Went over to Saint Raphaël to tea with the M.'s. Kept me for dinner. Coming back at night over the hills car stuck. Raining cats and dogs and pitch black. I was scared. Young Englishman in Citroen happened along. He was perfectly charming. Said he lived close by. I had got sopping wet trying to make the car start so he insisted I should come to his cottage to get dry. I let him take me. Marcia will have a fit when I tell her. But he had nice eyes. He lit the fire in his sitting-room and gave me hot whisky. I think he must be an artist for his room was hung with

paintings, mostly of African scenes, and some Riviera studies. He seems to know all about cars; anyway, he got the Delage started. Said clutch was slipping. Home 1 a.m.

She read on, skipping an entry here and there.

March 18th. My young man called at the hotel. I'd told him my name and he'd looked me up in the Cannes visitors' list. His name is Rex Garrett, an artist, as I thought. He speaks French beautifully. Says he was at the Beaux Arts for two years. P.S. So glad he hasn't suggested painting me. That would be so obvious.

March 24th. Marcia and I motored out to lunch with my young man at his cottage. Divine situation overlooking the sea. But it must be terribly lonely up there in the mountains. He hasn't even got a femme de ménage. Does his own shopping in his Citroen. He cooked the lunch. Marvellous omelette. He has steps down from his garden to the water and he showed me where he goes in swimming every morning, winter and summer. He looks awfully fit.

March 27th. My young man to tea. I find him very simpatico. So restful. He seems to know nobody at Cannes. Says the Casino crowd bore him.

March 30. Baron de Foix called after dinner. I was on the terrace with Rex. The Baron all worked up when I introduced them. Knows everything about R's paintings. Two of his pictures are in the Luxembourg and he is to have his own exhibition in Paris in May. The Baron wanted to give a luncheon and ask a lot of his duchesses and people to meet Rex. R. very rude. Said he couldn't waste his time on a lot of fool women. He apologised so nicely after old F. had gone and said he didn't mean me. I like him.

Below this entry was a line added in ink that had dried a different colour from the rest: *If I wanted to marry, this is the sort of man I should choose.*

She turned over the page and stopped again.

April 4th. Marcia tiresome. Says I am seeing too much of R. G. She thinks he's an adventurer. That's nonsense. He cares nothing about money. Marcia asked me if I proposed to throw myself away on an artist. I said I should not mind throwing myself away on this one.

April 6th. I am furious with Marcia. He thinks she is my chaperon and she didn't deny it. Living at the Carlton as we do, he probably imagines I'm an heiress. Marcia says so much the better, we shall now see if he's disinterested.

April 7. He's a strange young man. It's very hard to make him talk about himself. He mentioned quite casually to-night that he had served five years in the Foreign Legion. When I told this to Marcia she said it proves he's an adventurer. He's got the poise and charming manners of a well-bred Englishman, but there's some curious, passionate strain under the vineer (can't spell it!).

April 9. He's terribly proud and oh! such a lonely young man. I tried to tell him to-night that I'm only Marcia's companion, but I didn't get the chance. I wish I knew if he cares.

April 11. I'm sure he cares. He might have kissed me to-night.

April 12. Bet. Fifty dollars to the Little Sisters of the Poor next time they call begging against that cyclamen frock at Patou's that he kisses me before the week is up. Marcia very cross to-day.

April 13. I nearly lost my bet to-night. Why are the nicest men so slow?

April 14. I mean to marry Rex. Terrible row with Marcia about him to-day. I don't care if he is an adventurer. I love him.

April 20. Bought cyclamen frock. Damn! I hate it.

April 21. Marcia admits that Rex has asked her nothing about my income. She won't let me tell him the truth. She says if he's really in love with me he'll ask to marry me.

April 22. He doesn't care whether I have any money or not. He took me to dine at the Réserve to-night and told me all about his earnings and prospects. He's so modest about what he's done. The day after to-morrow he's coming to dine at the hotel. I love him, I love him . . .

April 23. Marcia very sweet to-day. I've promised her that, if he doesn't want me, I won't see him so often any more. But I've made up my mind that he's going to ask me to marry him to-morrow evening.

April 24. He loved me all the time from that first night on the Esterel. We are going to be married in Paris next month when he goes up for his exhibition.

She paused and, with a rapid gesture that was like a benediction, laid her hands for an instant on the entry. Then she ran through the record of her brief engagement until she reached again the day of the month. She hunted out a fountain pen from her bag and, in her big, upright hand, made an entry in the Log.

'Rex and I married,' was what she wrote.

She dashed it off with the air of a general signing a victorious despatch, her radiant face confiding to her

mirror the triumph of a charming woman who has had her way. Absently she blotted the line and was about to close the book when, moved by a sudden impulse, she bowed her shining head and kissed the page.

So absorbed had she been with the revival of old and fond memories that she had not remarked the flight of time. As she rose to restore the diary to its place in her dressing-case, her eye fell upon the gilded dial of her travelling clock. With some surprise she saw that the hands marked twenty minutes to one.

She halted in the centre of the floor and listened. The house was profoundly still. The dim bedroom, all blues and greys — powder-blue curtains drawn across the windows, soft pile carpet of the same hue, grey painted furniture — with the twisted pillars of the old Italian four-poster gleaming dully in the background, wore a secretive air which she found to be subtly oppressive.

She put her book away and opened a door that stood on one side of the bed. The light she switched up glittered coldly on burnished fittings and shining tiles. 'Rex!' she called softly; and, when there was no reply, rather hastily traversed the bathroom to the dressing-room beyond.

It was empty. Her husband's tweeds for the morning were folded across a chair and on the shrouded bed pyjamas and a dressing-gown were laid out. Her eyes were perplexed and a scarlet corner of her under lip was caught up by one of her milk-white teeth as she slowly returned to the bedroom and sat down again before the dressing-table. With automatic movements she began to brush her hair again, her eyes absently studying her reflection in the mirror.

Suddenly, she laid down the brush. Her face was

rather pink. Briskly, she stood up, and then, slowly and thoughtfully, resumed her seat. With her chin propped on her hand she remained sunk in meditation. She changed her position only to smooth out an eyebrow, to flick away a smear of powder from her cheek.

At last, with a determined air, she rose to her feet once more. She drew her loose wrapper about her and crossed the room to the door opening onto the landing.

A light burned in the hall below. The house was plunged in silence. In their little green slippers her feet were noiseless on the soft carpet as she hurried, rather desperately, downstairs. Rapidly, she crossed the hall and pushed open the dining-room door.

Here the central lights were still on, as she had left them on going up to bed, mirroring their yellow blur in the sheen of the Sheraton, striking out points of effulgence from the silver plate arrayed on the sideboard. The French windows, folded back, framed, beyond the little terrace where they had dined, a tall panel of rustling trees and shivering shadows cast by the moon. From the darkness mounted the melancholy rhythm of the frogs.

She hastened out upon the terrace and paused there, her hands poised on the balustrade while her eyes sought to pierce the mystery of the silent garden. 'Rex,' she called suddenly. 'Rex, where are you?' But only the frogs gave answer; and their hoarse plaint rang like mocking laughter in her ears.

She turned back into the house, flitted, searching from room to room. The shuttered drawing-room, the petit salon, wainscotted in green, the snug library — into one and all she looked and thought bitterly, as fruitless she turned from each, of their joyous tour of explora-

tion a few hours before, hand-in-hand like children, when she had proudly done the honours of Marcia's exquisite taste.

Sooner than it takes to write she was on the terrace again, panic now paling her cheeks, her heart hammering in her ears, bewildered and unhappy, torn between those two hardest taskmasters of the human passions, anger and fear.

'Rex,' she called in a frightened voice. 'Rex, why don't you answer me?' and, calling, fled down into the garden. Hard and bare, in the moon's silver radiance, the paths wound their emptiness into the recesses of the deserted grounds . . .

At the end of the long garden, set in the wall of mellow brick between two pillars, was an iron gate. The villa's main entrance was in rear and this gate gave upon a road along the river-bank which, the villa passed, degenerated into a mere track leading over the fields to a group of cottages beside the lock. In the other direction the road ran up to the bridge across the Seine and the village and the Paris road beyond.

The iron gate stood open. The sight of it stayed Sara's hurrying feet like an arm thrust out to bar her passage. With scared eyes she stopped dead, peering into the road. The branches of the elms which screened the garden overhung the wall, casting an inky shadow.

Suddenly her courage forsook her. The tears burned in her eyes, and the young breasts, softly outlined under their sheathing of thin silk, began to heave. 'It isn't possible!' she murmured brokenly to herself. 'He'd never have gone away and left me like this!'

She went out into the road and stood, a forlorn figure, in the thick white dust. The road stretched its unbroken

length to where it sloped up to the bridge. Far and wide nothing stirred. No light was visible save at the road's end the sullen ruby gleam of the lantern suspended below the central arch of the bridge.

He was gone!

Blankly, and with uncomprehending eyes, she stared about her, stared at the open gate, the empty road, stunned by their irrefutable evidence of his treachery. She had the sensation that her very heart had ceased to beat, that the whole of her being was icebound in the chilling grip of her discovery. She tried to think and could not; tried to establish some comforting explanation, but in vain. Like an ice mass, realisation crushed her and congealed her. She was like a traveler caught by an avalanche, beaten to earth, stifled, frozen, swept away, under the impact of a glacial and irresistible force.

He was only an adventurer after all! He had cared enough not to take advantage of her, to cover up his flight by protestations of affection to the last; but that was the whole extent of his love. And she had trusted him, flung herself blindly at his head, wooed him openly, believing in her vanity and folly that she, and not Marcia's senseless lie, was the magnet . . .

A gust of anger stormed over her. The blood surged into her face and she clenched her small fists. He had abandoned her on their wedding night, shamed her openly. What was she to do? What was she to say? To Marcia, whom she had estranged by her blind wilfulness; to the servants who, only a few hours since, had brought her their little presents? She had a mental picture of Marie, with her small, dark face, bringing the breakfast in the morning and listening, politely

incredulous, sniffing a scandal, to some preposterous explanation . . .

A tear rolled down her cheek. With a furious gesture she dashed it aside with her hand, her face burning with indignation and shame. And then at her feet she saw a piece of paper.

She picked it up, scanned it vaguely. It was a half-sheet of common writing-paper with a fold down the middle. There was a switch on the gatepost which lit up the two electric lamps affixed one on either pillar of the gate. She turned the switch and, by the bright light of the lamps, saw that the paper contained two words roughly printed in ink.

The words were EL RAS.

She crumpled the paper into a ball and flung it from her. Then she shut the gate and, with head held high, walked back to the house.

CHAPTER IV

THE MESSENGER IN BLACK

AFTER Sally had left him, Rex Garrett, fumbling absently in the pocket of his dinner-coat, found a box of matches and relit his cigar. The habitually serene expression of his features, un-English in their almost Grecian purity of line, was brightened by a rather dreamy smile. He remained standing by the fish-pond, puffing at his cigar, his hands in his pockets, his head thrown back, and his eyes raised to the stars.

A starry night always sent his thoughts scudding back to Africa. Five years out of a young man's life leave an indelible impression behind; and it was on summer nights, when the blue-black vault of heaven seemed to tremble with the starlight, that the East came and tugged at his heart-strings. Then would half-forgotten smells and sounds throng upon his senses, greasy African cooking odours of garlic and saffron, the scent of cedar and olive logs piled on the bivouac fire, the muffled thump of drums, the muted squeaky droning of the Berber pipe . . .

Thus he remained in happy reverie, his mind travelling from the old life put away to the new life to begin that night, until the steady throbbing of a motor-car, growing ever louder, drew his attention to the end of the garden. He knew, for Sally had taken him for a walk that way before dinner, that the road there, beside the river, was virtually a dead end.

He glanced down the garden and caught sight of the white beam of a headlight. It was groping its way slowly forward, touching with vivid green the foliage as

it swept the elms. He found himself wondering idly what, at that hour of the night, a car was doing on that road. The next moment his vague speculation had given way to definite surprise. The white beam steadied, stood still, then suddenly went out, and, above the breathless panting of the engine, the bell on the garden gate jangled.

The villa, built in the eighties, yet retained the rusty iron bell of its early days, originally connected by a wire with another bell which rang in the servants' quarters up at the house. The wire had long since disappeared, but the bell on the top of the garden gate, with its projecting iron handle, survived. The service of both contrivances was now performed by an electric bell. But the button, little used, placed on the pillar of the garden gate, was not easily discoverable among the ivy. Rex knew this; and consequently the cracked and wheezy jangling of the iron bell informed him that the belated caller was a stranger to Les Ormes.

Sally had told the butler he might go to bed as soon as he had cleared dinner away, Rex undertaking to bolt the French windows of the dining-room on retiring for the night. Baptiste must long since be asleep, the young man reflected, and forthwith made his way down the garden. Two men, conversing in undertones, stood in the shadow of the elms as Rex unlatched the gate. The one was wearing a chauffeur's cap with an ordinary suit, the other was dressed from head to foot in black. On the road a dusty touring-car was drawn up. As Rex peered round the gate, the man in black sprang forward.

He was attired in the rather extravagant mourning which the French affect on the slightest of pretexts. There was a deep band of crape about the crown of

his bowler hat, his jacket suit was black like his tie, and in one hand he fondled a pair of very shiny and obviously new black gloves. He was a little man with a dead-white face and a long black moustache with ends drooping like a mandarin's. He wore a pair of pince-nez on a long black ribbon.

His pallor was terrible. Seen in the wan light of the moon the hue of his face was greenish. He was a prey to the most extreme agitation which all manner of little fluttering movements of head and hands and body betrayed. On seeing Rex, he cried out sharply in French:

‘This is the Villa des Ormes, is it not?’

‘It is,’ said Rex composedly.

The man in black laid a trembling hand on the speaker's silken lapel.

‘Listen!’ he said, ‘there is an Englishman here, a certain Monsieur Garrett, whom I wish to see instantly, urgently, on business that does not admit a moment's delay. Wait! I am aware that he was married today; but the affair that brings me is of such vital importance that I cannot afford to respect even the sanctity of the nuptial chamber. I must speak with this Englishman instantly. It is a matter of life and death!’

The man in black rattled off this rather stilted speech at a tremendous pace, then paused, blinking, and gasping for breath.

‘You can say what you have to say to me, monsieur,’ Rex replied. ‘My name is Garrett!’

He spoke in French that was not a whit less pure than the other's.

‘The same whose picture exhibition was opened in Paris yesterday?’

‘Certainly . . .

‘Thank God!’ cried the man in black. He swung round to his companion in the chauffeur’s cap. ‘Turn the car. We will go back the way we came. This road is fearful: we must not risk another tyre burst.’ The chauffeur sprang to the driving-seat, once more the headlights flung forward their immense white beams, the engine roared. ‘Come,’ cried the man in black, turning again to Rex, ‘we must start back for Paris at once. There isn’t a second to lose . . .’

Impulsively he seized the young man by the elbow and sought to edge him towards the car. But Rex stepped back swiftly.

‘Would you mind telling me who you are and what you want with me?’ he requested with icy politeness. ‘You may as well realise at once that I am not starting for anywhere to-night, with you or with anybody else!’

The man in black smote his brow.

‘I lose my head!’ he declaimed. ‘Bon Dieu, such an evening as I’ve had. Since seven o’clock I hunt Paris for you. Your picture exhibition closed: your agent absent from home. It was a friend of mine on the staff of one of the American newspapers who at last discovered that this morning you were married at the American Church and that you had come down here for your honeymoon. Ten o’clock was already past when we started. Ninety kilometres to go and ninety kilometres to return in order to fetch you back to Paris. Marcel here burnt the road, but dame! at night, with such road as the war has left in France. A burst tyre outside Mantes did nothing to speed us up, allez, and le bon Dieu alone knows how long we’ve been hunting for this villa in the dark . . .’

He sighed and mopped his dripping forehead.

‘But who are you, diable!’ Rex interrupted violently; ‘and what do you want with me at this time of night?’

Now the chauffeur had managed to turn the car on the narrow road. It drew up beside them, its bonnet pointed towards the blood-red glow of the lamp under the bridge. The headlights clove a great wedge of brilliance in the gloom beneath the elms. The car, thickly coated with dust and smelling of hot metal, trembled to the nervous throb of the engine.

‘A thousand pardons!’ exclaimed the man in black. ‘Voilà! I am Maître Chardon, of the Paris Bar. My client, Pedro Gomez, has sent me to bring you to him . . .’

As he spoke he darted a probing glance at the other and paused expectantly, his eyes, quick and black behind their glasses, ferreting enquiringly in his companion’s face. But Rex Garrett saw nothing of this.

‘And is this a time to invade a man’s privacy?’ he demanded indignantly. ‘Your client has sent you on a fool’s errand, monsieur. I don’t know the fellow; I never even heard of him. But if he were my own brother, I wouldn’t go to him to-night. Is that clear? I wish you good-evening!’

He turned on his heels to reënter the garden.

But Maître Chardon in highest alarm cried out: ‘Wait!’

Feverishly, the perspiration glistening on his livid face, as he began to pat his pockets. At last he found a letter-case from which he extracted a folded half-sheet of paper. He handed it to Rex.

‘If I gave you this you would come, my client said,’ he explained.

With an indifferent air Rex Garrett took the scrap of paper and unfolded it. He held it down in the bright glare of the near headlight to read what message it contained.

As his eyes fell on the paper, his face seemed to stiffen. On the instant the last vestige of annoyance had fled from his features to give place to a look of troubled astonishment. He raised keenly enquiring eyes to the lawyer. The paper fluttered to the ground.

‘Where is the man who gave you this?’ he asked quickly.

‘My instructions were only to bring you to where he awaits your coming,’ was the guarded reply.

‘But I can’t go with you now. You must realise it’s impossible. To-morrow . . .’

‘To-morrow will be too late.’ Maître Chardon’s voice rang hollow. ‘If you wish to see my client alive, you must accompany me now, this instant. It’s a matter of life and death.’

‘Of life and death!’ repeated the young man musingly.

‘Of the most extreme urgency.’

‘This man who sent you to me, he’s ill? He’s met with an accident?’

‘I have nothing more to say!’

From the sleeping village across the river the clock struck once. Like the tolling of the passing bell the solemn clang fended the silence that had fallen between them.

The lawyer whipped out his watch.

‘Half-past twelve already!’ he gasped in accents of the acutest dismay. ‘Even without mishap we cannot hope to be in Paris much before half-past two. What-
ever you decide to do, monsieur, whether to go with me

or not, I must start without another second's delay.'

So saying, he sprang into the vibrating car. The young man stood irresolute, scowling and pinching his chin. He glanced over his shoulder at the square white mass of the villa rising impressively above the trees. There was a moment's silence in which only the gentle hammering of the motor and the gruff chant of the frogs were audible.

'I'll go with you,' Rex said suddenly. 'I'll explain things to my wife; she'll understand. Give me two minutes . . .'

'Not two seconds,' was the inexorable reply. 'I am desolate, monsieur, to refuse so reasonable a request, but I have my duty to my client to think of. I can promise you that you will be back for breakfast; but I cannot wait now. Already I have wasted too much valuable time.' He tapped the chauffeur on the shoulder. 'All right, Marcel.'

The engine's note deepened.

'But, good God!' Rex cried, 'I can't leave here like this. You must let me explain . . .'

But the car had begun to move forward. Rex jumped upon the running-board.

'I'm coming with you!' he exclaimed, 'but you will surely give me a moment to run up to the house . . . ?'

'En avant, Marcel!' the harsh voice commanded.

Then Rex Garrett leapt into the tonneau and as the car, rocking over the pot-holes of the road, sprang forward, dropped heavily into the seat beside the man in black. He said no further word, but, when they were on the bridge, turned and looked long and fixedly at the white mass of the villa, glinting through the screen of elms, where his bride was waiting.

The car, turning sharp left-handed as it debouched from the bridge, flashed past the blank windows of the village water-front and went roaring out upon the Route Nationale.

The lawyer, as though realising that the most difficult part of his errand was accomplished, grunted, pulled his crape-hung hat over his brows and settled down to stertorous slumber. But Rex at his side sat bolt upright, the wind fluttering his light evening clothes, his head bared to the breeze. He saw nothing of the black and silver nocturne which their headlong course unfolded, the fleeing poplars, the gliding tarred road, polished and lucent like jet, carpeting the corridor of bright light which went always before. In imagination he was looking again into the grim and swarthy face of Luis Larraga, the légionnaire who had been his friend.

El Kef!

That was the message agreed upon between them. Only Luis could have sent it; Pedro Gomez was, of course, an alias. He wished he might have seen Sally for a moment, to explain to her the urgency of the summons — a matter of life and death, the lawyer had said it was; she, with her quick sympathy, would have understood.

So he and Luis were to meet again.

Swiftly his mind slipped back to two years ago.

CHAPTER V

EL KEF

THERE are meetings in life so heavy with the weight of events as yet unborn that, even before their significance is disclosed, their every detail lingers in the memory. Thus it was with Rex Garrett's first meeting with Luis Larraga. As he cast his memory back, in his mind's eye he saw himself again in the shabby khaki of the Legion, felt the rough mountain wind on his face, while to his nostrils crept once more the acrid reek of the mule stables and the sharp, sour odour of the lime-washed huts.

That January morning there had been tobacco at the post of El Kef...

It was Klau, the German on picket duty at the opening in the barbed-wire barricade, who first raised the cry for which, three days long, thirty exasperated and smoke-hungry men had been straining their ears. The German had a megaphone of a voice — was it not his favourite boast that, of old, his word of command would carry clear across the great barrack square at Potsdam? — and his shout of 'El Halluf!' went ringing like a trumpet-call across the bleak and mournful Moroccan plain as though it would impinge upon and be thrown back in echo from the frowning Atlas bastions beyond.

In the mirror of his memory Rex watched how, at that stentorian cry, the garrison of El Kef came tumbling out into the narrow space between the tin sheds and squat mud huts of the post. Huddled in groups they stood,

a score or more of sun-blackened, hardy men, chattering in different languages and pointing at a grey cloud rolling up the stony track to the fort.

Presently out of the dust flurry the twinkling feet of two heavily burthened little donkeys emerged. Hard on their heels, urging them along with raucous cries and resounding thwacks with a cudgel, came a black-gowned figure with head wrapped up like a nun's. To the yapping of all the barrack curs, half dog, half jackal, and a fusillade of good-humoured abuse from the men of the guard bunched in the thin winter sunshine before the guard-hut, the donkeys and the driver clattered through the gate in the low mud wall and into the post. There, surrounded by noisy groups, the driver brutally wrenched his charges to a standstill and, unwinding the cloth from his head, disclosed a wrinkled yellow face with a nose as broad as a Hottentot's and a bushy grey beard.

This was the pedlar whose monthly visits were red-letter days in the calendar of El Kef. If he possessed a name of his own, nobody ever troubled to enquire what it was; but because he was a Jew, and that most despised of his race, a Moorish Jew, to boot, the Legion called him 'El Halluf,' which, being interpreted, is 'The Wild Pig.' As El Halluf the pedlar was hailed and uproariously welcomed at every post from Khenifra to Midelt.

For months at a time he would turn his back on the swarming lanes of his native ghetto at Meknez and, in the sooty cap and gabardine which the Maghzen imposes on the Moroccan Jew, wander with his pedlar's pack up and down the French outposts in the valley of the Moulouya. What his pack principally contained was indicated by the broadside of demands the légionnaires

levelled at the old man as he dumped his great saddlebags upon the ground. For tobacco and cigarettes they clamoured, for matches, for soap, for needles and thread, writing-paper; for all those things without which even men of the simplest needs find life unbearable in the desert places of the earth. But most of all they clamoured for tobacco.

It was, indeed, almost their only solace on this barren upland thrusting its head forward into the plain of stunted grass and naked shoulders like the Sphinx on the sands of Gizeh. The sun scorched them by day and the wind, sweeping down from the snow-capped mountain crests, blew pitilessly through their thin drill and seared the skin of their faces and hands with its rude breath; and at night, when they struggled out of the fetid warmth of the huts to take their turn of sentry, the glacial chill of the air was like the touch of a dead man's finger, and above them the tremendous North African sky, blazing with stars, had the hard gleam of spun glass.

Day after day the raging wind drove scudding streamers of dust across the plain like burnouses blown out behind the headlong dash of a fantasia. Then, again and again, the post would be caught up in a blinding, choking sandstorm which tore at the doors, drummed madly on the tin roofs, and bent before it the light poles of the wireless aërial. Or from the foothills draped in mist great curtains of slashing rain or stabbing sleet would advance, rushing like standards borne forward in the attack.

Tobacco steadied nerves worn down by hours of incessant watchfulness on the parapet whence one looked out across the desolate expanse all plumed with

asphodel at the ruddy flicker of the rebel fires on the lower mountain slopes, nerves that peopled the shadows outside the barbed wire with the slinking shapes of raiding tribesmen, working singly, as was the habit of the Beni M'Guild, and naked, with a knife between the teeth.

Tobacco soothed tempers frayed out by the Legion's iron discipline and by the constant play, one against the other, of alien mentalities whose only connecting link was their monotony of life and scene. And, best of all, tobacco, forasmuch as strong drink was mostly lacking, put to flight those mournful phantoms which the Legion trails after it the length and breadth of French North Africa, ghosts that these men of mystery — soldiers of fortune, adventurers, ne'er-do-wells — dare not look in the face because of their silent reminder of What Might Have Been, of good fortune squandered, of chances missed, of love and honour betrayed . . .

Astonishing how clearly it all came back to him!

He had a vivid vision of himself, clutching a precious packet of Algerian tobacco on which he had expended his last four francs, escaping from the seething yard and ducking his head to enter the low door of the Foyer du Soldat. Every detail of the squalid hovel which housed the soldier's club was sharp-etched in his memory: the roof, low like a dugout's; the rough mud walls distempered a dirty yellow, which Klau, the German, who had an artistic bent, was decorating with vile daubs — desert scenes and the like; the trestle table where, in justification of the title on the door, a battered draught-board, a greasy pack of cards, and some ragged magazines lay about; and at the table, sunk in an atti-

tude of profound dejection, a big man, swart of countenance, square of jaw, low of brow, with a bristling black moustache.

Rex scarcely knew Luis Larraga. The latter had come up with a draft only a few weeks before. A morose individual, this Spaniard, who spent most of his spare time gambling. Rex nodded to him as he sat down at the table and proceeded to fill his pipe.

‘If you want anything from El Halluf you’d better hurry up,’ he remarked. ‘He’s almost sold out of tobacco already.’

The big man scowled.

‘I have no money left,’ he muttered — his French was very pure. ‘Klau cleaned me out with the dice last night.’ He was staring hungrily at the square bag of tobacco in its yellow paper wrapper.

Rex pushed the packet across.

‘Help yourself!’ he invited and scratched a match. Instinctively the other’s hand had crept to his tunic pocket. But now he drew back.

‘I don’t wish to smoke,’ he said shortly.

Still his eye remained greedily on the tobacco. A pleasant murmur of voices drifted in from the yard outside. Everybody was lighting pipes or cigarettes and a swathe of blue smoke hung in the crystalline air. A spirit of deep content seemed to rest over the cantonment. One would have said a good fairy had stolen up the stony path and, with a wave of her wand, sent the imps of melancholy and ennui fleeing into the *bled*.

Then with his knife Rex slashed the packet of tobacco in two and pushed one half across the table to Larraga. He did not realize then what impelled him to the action; but it gained him a friend. Many

times afterwards they had recalled their talk that morning in the club.

Said Rex: 'I have more than I need.'

Larraga stared at him. 'You mean this for me?'

'Certainly. What's tobacco for unless to be smoked? Fetch out your pipe, man!'

The other's hand strayed again to his pocket.

'I can never pay you back.' His voice was rather sullen. 'I lose all my money gambling.' With quick nervous gestures he began to cram his pipe. 'What'll you do later in the month if I take half your stock?'

'Go without, I suppose. It won't be the first time. When I was in Mesopotamia we were sometimes three weeks with nothing to smoke . . .'

Larraga was lighting an old clay pipe.

'A philosopher, I perceive?' he said drily.

'Philosophy is one road to happiness . . .'

'I wish I had your secret.' The old clay was purring comfortably now. 'I've been watching you since I came up here three weeks ago. A year now I've served with the Legion and I've never met a man who faced things like you. I've known fellows who didn't grumble, though, dame! they're not many; but I've yet to see the légionnaire who takes everything with a smile the way you do. You seem to enjoy roughing it?'

'You bet I do. That's why I joined the Legion: for the life, and to get back to the East . . .'

The dark man spat on the floor. 'I've heard that the English are mad,' he remarked. 'Do you mean to tell me you signed up with the Legion from choice?'

'I do indeed! I love the life in wild places and three years in Mesopotamia and Palestine gave me a hunger for the East! I could have cried when they sent us

home. I had some savings and my war gratuity and I put the lot into an Eastern venture, prospecting in the Sinai desert it was, because I wanted to go back. The thing was a swindle and I lost my money . . .'

The other laughed a grim laugh.

'Sergeant Hunger was ever the best recruiter for the Legion,' he remarked.

'Not in my case,' Rex rejoined. 'I had the offer of a job in a London office. But I couldn't face the prospect. Besides, there was nothing to keep me in England . . .'

He broke off shyly. 'But I don't know why I'm telling you all this.'

'Don't stop,' said Larraga. 'Nothing is more grateful to the ears of a failure than the story of another fellow's folly.'

Rex grinned. 'Bit of a cynic, aren't you?'

The dark man smiled. 'Failures are always cynics. But you were telling me how you came to join the Legion . . .'

'A book fell into my hands one day, a French book by a woman explorer. I forget her name, but her book was called "A l'Ombre Chaude de l'Islam" . . .'

His companion nodded. 'A classic. Isabelle Eberhardt wrote it. A famous Orientalist. She perished more than twenty years ago in the great flood at Aïn Sefra.'

'The very title electrified me!' the other cried. 'In the hot shadow of Islam — man, but the whole of the East is in the name! It beckoned to me from every page. Light and shade, the great white sunshine of the desert, the black, black shadows of the little Damascus lanes, I had loved. And so I found North Africa . . .'

'And Africa contents you?'

‘I love its every stick and stone, its red mountains, its high white kasbahs, its seething cities, its vast, illimitable desert; and in the four years I’ve been with the Legion I’ve marched tens of thousands of kilometres across it, fighting and building roads — Algeria, the Sud Oranais, the Ouergha, the Tafilalet, the Sous! Next year my five years are up, but, diable! sometimes I think I’ll reëngage. Enjoy roughing it? Of course I do . . .’

He paused and rekindled his pipe. Larraga leaned back luxuriantly, filling his lungs with the acrid tobacco smoke and blowing it out through his nostrils.

‘You’re easily satisfied,’ he remarked. ‘I loathe the country. And yet I wouldn’t go back.’ His voice trailed away and his hot black eyes grew troubled. ‘Why don’t you try for a commission?’ he enquired after a pause.

Rex shook his head. ‘I wouldn’t take one in the British Army. I’m of the people and to me the simple folk are the salt of the earth. The poor are happier than the rich, Larraga!’

His companion grunted. ‘Happiness depends on what you’re looking for. What do you want out of life?’

‘Art,’ came the swift rejoinder. ‘I want to paint. I was at the Beaux Arts in Paris when the war came . . .’

Larraga jerked his thumb at the wall behind him.

‘I wish you’d take over the painting here, then, and put this odious Boche out of business . . .’

Rex laughed gaily. ‘I wouldn’t interfere with Klau’s simple pleasures. Especially as some of his amusements are much less inoffensive. You’re a fool to gamble with him. I’m certain those dice of his are loaded. The men in the guard-hut were saying as much only last night . . .’

‘Bah,’ the other interrupted, ‘I know it. But it passes the time.’ He paused, and then, as though to change the subject, said drily: ‘Then you won’t give us a taste of your quality?’

Rex chuckled good-humouredly. ‘Now you’re being sarcastic. But some day I shall feel that I really can paint. Then I’m going back to civilization . . . to Paris!’

‘Paris!’ Larraga imitated his companion’s voice. ‘You said that like a Parisian, ecstatically, as though you were breathing the name of your mistress.’ He grew serious. ‘Tell me, you who speak French like a Frenchman, how much French blood have you?’

‘Not a drop!’ was the prompt reply.

‘I can’t believe it.’

‘Better blood than French, Larraga . . .’

The other shrugged his shoulders.

‘Now the Rosbif is speaking . . .’

‘No, mon vieux, the Basque!’

Rex never forgot the look that his companion gave him. The sullen face softened and the dark, suspicious eyes melted with a sudden tenderness.

‘Basque?’ he repeated as though to himself, and then he slammed his hand, palm downwards, upon the table. ‘They told me you were an Englishman or I must have guessed the truth. All Basques are brothers and blood calls to blood. . .’

‘Then you are a Basque too?’ Rex put in. ‘I thought you might be by the name . . .’

Larraga nodded. ‘From the moment you spoke to me just now, I seemed to feel there was an invisible bond between us. I must have been blind. Now I look at you, I see it: your build, your dark hair, your proud manner, everything about you shouts the Basque as

loud as the *irrintzin*, our national cry. And yet you claim to be an Englishman. Tell me — I can ask you now . . .’ he paused, searching the other’s face — ‘is Garrett your real name?’

To every *légionnaire* his agitation would have been intelligible. In this corps of aliases not even the registers of the *dépôt* at Sidi Bel Abbes set forth the rightful names of all who toil and sweat and fall under the shot-torn colours of the Legion.

‘My mother’s name was Garat,’ Rex answered in a low voice. ‘They Englished it to Garrett when I was naturalised and sent to school in England.’

‘Garat?’ repeated Larraga. ‘By the name you would be from the Labourd?’

‘From the neighbourhood of Ustaritz. And you?’

For a fraction of a second the other hesitated. Then:

‘From Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port,’ he said, and looked the other boldly in the eyes.

‘You’re a French Basque, then? I thought you were Spanish.’ Rex paused dubiously. ‘But what are you doing in the Legion?’

‘Basque trusts Basque,’ spoke his companion, ‘and I know you won’t betray me. Yes, I’m French. My real name doesn’t matter; at any rate, it isn’t Larraga. I was an officer in the *Chasseurs* at Bayonne . . .’

‘A French officer!’ exclaimed the other, startled.

Larraga nodded. ‘There was trouble; and I fled into Spain to escape the disgrace of degradation. I was sentenced to five years’ penal servitude by default . . .’

Rex whistled.

‘But the risk is terrific! Supposing you were recognised?’

‘I’ve changed a good deal. It’s three years since it happened...’

‘It seems like madness to me. Why did you do it?’

Impulsively Larraga laid his hand on the other’s sleeve.

‘I couldn’t keep away from soldiering. It was my whole existence. They took from me my Legion of Honour, my Croix de Guerre; but they couldn’t extinguish my deepest instinct. Five times I was wounded in the war. Ah, mon vieux, that was a life for a man! I was happy then, par exemple, as I should be here if we got more fighting. It’s this deadly waiting about that galls . . .’

He sighed and tapped out his pipe. ‘We’ll say no more of this,’ he remarked. ‘But henceforth you and I are friends, is it not?’ — and he held out his hand.

‘More than friends,’ said Rex, as he grasped it. ‘Brother Basques!’

CHAPTER VI

THE PICTURE ON THE WALL

BASQUE blood is clannish. Though only vaguely conscious of his Basque strain, Rex, looking back, recognised that it must have drawn him to this lonely man who, proud and reserved, as is the Basque nature, had, like himself, found no intimate among their comrades. The bond they sealed that day had no need of further confidences. Men's friendships are like that. Their roots strike deeper than the subsoil of mutual confession. Only once again, after that January morning, did Luis Larraga raise the veil that obscured his past. Rex was not likely to forget the occasion. It was the day his friend rescued him from the drunken fury of Klau.

Six-foot-two of brawn, topped by a bony head covered with blond bristles, with shifty eyes sunk in a puffy, insolent face, and a flaxen moustache twisted heavenwards in Kaiser style,—that was Klau. He had been a sergeant-major in the Prussian Foot Guards, and with that famous corps had faced the inferno of British rapid fire along the Menin Road at Ypres in '14. Rex, as the only Englishman in the company, was his particular butt, and he continually sought to provoke him by sneering allusions to 'the mercenaries,' or, more bluntly, the 'Schweinhunde,' as he called the British Army. But Rex would not let himself be drawn. He laughed at Klau's boastings of Prussian prowess, laughed and said nothing.

The detachment was still at El Kef, but due for relief in a week. On this day El Halluf had called again. Wares less innocuous than tobacco or soap were some-

times hidden in the old Jew's packs; and now and then, after his visits, the greenish glint of Casablanca absinthe was to be seen in a pannikin cautiously passed from hand to hand in the huts.

Klau had finished the decoration of the soldiers' club. His final effort was a portrait. For days he had bragged about this picture, working at it in secret and covering it up with a cloth when his duties called him away. He would show them, he boasted, the most beautiful woman in the world. When the time came to unveil the chef-d'œuvre, it was plain that the German had been drinking.

Rex made no comment when the painting stood disclosed. It represented a Spanish dancer, with hands raised in conventional pose, wearing a mantilla draped over a high comb and a short spangled skirt. Like the rest of Klau's work the picture was executed in the style of a poster outside a booth at a fair. The Germans and Russians, who formed the bulk of the garrison, were loud in praise; for Klau, as a bully, had to be conciliated. Remarking Rex's silence, the artist swaggered over to the table where the other was reading.

"And have you nothing to say?" he demanded truculently.

"I'm no judge," Rex replied quietly and went on with his reading.

Klau leant forward and with the flat of his hand jerked his victim's chin up.

'You've never seen an Englishwoman to match that little beauty, I'll swear,' he exclaimed thickly.

Rex flushed. 'Keep your hands off me,' he said tensely.

Hands on hips the German confronted him.

'Well, have you?'

'If that's your idea of beauty,' Rex retorted, 'I certainly have not!'

The blood flamed in Klau's fat face.

'So?' he remarked. 'Professional jealousy, hein? Perhaps you could paint it better?'

Rex laughed. 'I couldn't paint it worse!'

'Then let the great English Artist show us?' rejoined the German sneeringly. He pointed at the wall. 'There's a blank space...'

Rex shook his head. 'I don't know the original...'

The German turned round and picked up a large photograph from the stool on which his materials were set out. 'Bitte...'

Rex waved the other off. 'I'm not competing!' he said good-humouredly.

Klau reddened again. 'You criticise my art,' he said loudly, 'and when I challenge you to do better, you run away. No, no, Herr Engländer, it shall be as I say or I'll bang your head against that wall until you see such pictures as you've never dreamt of...'

The other légionnaires were crowding round, enjoying the scene. Rex had no intention of provoking the German in his present state. So he simply laughed and said: 'All right!'

He took the photograph from Klau.

It was a head and shoulders study of a young girl in a mantilla, the bare neck simply draped with a scarf. 'Inocencia' was scrawled in a big hand across a corner. Rex's eyebrows went up when he saw the face. It was beautifully shaped, with passionate black eyes and little curls, lustrous and dark, brushed out on either side of the mantilla.

The surface of the wall had been rubbed smooth. Rex,

disregarding Klau's paints, took a stick of charcoal from his pocket and set to work. The other men in the room pressed round him in a circle, laughing and making ribald comments.

Rex drew the outlines of the face life-size. Little by little, the likeness began to appear. A Russian nudged Klau. 'Mon vieux,' he sniggered, 'the little Angliche, he makes your woman live!' Klau, his tall figure towering above the rest, scowled fiercely.

Absorbed in his work the draughtsman did not hear the door open. The next moment, with a shout of anger, Luis Larraga burst his way into the centre of the group. His face was chalky white, his black eyes were blazing. He caught Rex by the front of the tunic and with the other hand pointed dramatically at the wall. His look was heavy with suspicion.

'That face!' he said hoarsely. 'Why do you draw it here?'

Instantly a chorus of protest went up from the crowd.

'Get out! Shut up! Let him finish!'

Rex stared in astonishment at his friend.

'I don't know anything about it,' he answered. 'She's a friend of Klau's.' He stooped and picked up the photograph from where it lay on the stool. 'I'm painting from this...'

Luis snatched the photograph and rounded furiously on the German.

'You dirty Boche,' he roared, 'where did you steal this picture?'

The German's mouth was brutal as without warning his long arms shot out and his great hands fastened themselves clamp-like, about the Basque's throat. Larraga, caught unawares, writhed powerless in that merciless

grip. Klau lifted up his victim by the neck, drawing him towards him until their chins were almost touching.

‘We Germans don’t have to steal the photographs of our mistresses,’ he grunted in his guttural French, ‘in Spain or anywhere else, you greasy thief!’

With that he spat full in Larraga’s face and cast him from him. The Basque reeled backwards and measured his length on the floor. The photograph fell to the ground.

The insult was gross and horrible. Rex’s gorge rose and he sprang forward to avenge his friend. A German stepped between, but Rex elbowed him aside and drove with his fists at Klau’s jaw. The blow was badly aimed and merely grazed the other’s cheek. With a bellow of rage, Klau snatched up a rifle that stood against the table and, stepping swiftly back, levelled it at his assailant.

In the infinitesimal fraction of a second that intervened while that reddish eye glared along the barrel covering him, Rex had time to remember that all rifles at El Kef were loaded. But an instant before the shot crashed out, a figure hurled itself across the room. Klau was swept clean off his feet and flung in a wide parabola to land with a thud against the farther wall.

The place was in a turmoil. Through the thin blue haze of cordite smoke Rex saw Luis Larraga’s face peering anxiously at him.

‘Not hit, are you?’

‘Thanks to you, he missed me. But I don’t know how you did it...’

‘Bah! — an old wrestling trick!’

Then the guard rushed in. As the three delinquents, dusty and breathing hard, were marched away, Luis,

his face a mask of icy rage, hissed in his friend's ear:

'Inocencia, she was my fiancée! Klau's going to tell me the truth before I kill him...'

But Fate decreed otherwise. The Legion is in the habit of adjusting its own disputes; and the lieutenant in command, an experienced if disillusioned ranker, was not surprised to discover that no witness would testify. Luis refused to speak, and Rex, taking his cue from his friend, was equally mute; nor had Klau any incentive for following a different course. So, in the interest of discipline, the trio were awarded seven days' cell apiece.

But when the two friends were released from the squalid prison hut, it was to find that the detachment was being relieved in two sections, bound for different destinations, and that Klau had already left with the first batch. They subsequently heard he had been transferred to another battalion; and the company knew him no more. Rex never learned what became of the photograph; Luis did not mention the matter again.

But they did not forget El Kef. The cheerless post, where each had found his first friend in the Legion, came to be in their thoughts the symbol of their comradeship. Now, as the car whirled him Pariswards through the night, down the wind memories went fleeting, each whispering to Rex of his friend.

Wherever he looked over the retrospect of his last year with the Legion, he seemed to see Luis and himself together. Now they were sharing the shelter of the same boulder on a sun-baked hilltop of the Tadla, where the bullets thudded against the rocks and the mitrailleuses went roaring in and out of the defiles, and from the skyline shrilled the blood-curdling yells of the Chleu women

exciting their men to battle. Now they were bivouacked with the mounted company in the scrub, drowsily watching the jackals padding in the shadows outside the circle of the fire and listening to the mules stamping and rattling at their chains in the darkness beyond. Or they were sipping mint tea in the little moorish café of the Medersah Garden at Rabat while Luis gave Rex a lesson in the Eskuara, the ancient tongue of their race, which Rex had all but forgotten. They had parted at Fez, on the green hillside overlooking the white maze of the old city. Rex was going back to France; Luis had still three years to serve. Luis would not admit that they might meet again.

‘When I come back to France,’ he declared sombrely, ‘it will be in secret.’

‘To France?’ Rex cried. ‘You wouldn’t be so foolhardy?’

But the other relapsed into silence.

‘Promise me at least,’ Rex urged, ‘that, if you are in trouble, you’ll call on me.’

‘Only in my most desperate need,’ Luis assured him; ‘and who knows whether I shall be able to use even the name by which you’ve known me here?’

‘You don’t mean you’d desert?’ cried Rex, aghast.

But again his friend was obstinately mute.

‘Have it your own way,’ said Rex. ‘But we’ll arrange a code word. When I receive it, Luis, I’ll come to you. That’s all I’ve got to say.’

The word they chose was El Kef...

They parted and thereafter silence...

Rex wrote; but his letters remained unanswered. Gradually, with the change of scene and the coming of

success, the mists of the past began to wreath themselves in his mind about the figure of Légionnaire Garrett. Little by little, his friendship with Luis detached itself from his everyday existence. Not that he had forgotten this friend who had saved his life; but he thought about him less often. Now that the summons had come, however, he drew from the storehouse of his brain the souvenir of El Kef and found it fresh and fragrant.

But he was deeply troubled. Again and again, as the car sped through the darkness, he told himself that the price of friendship was not light. Throughout that night journey a radiant figure hovered always in the background of his mind, shining steadfastly through these old memories.

The thought of Sally waiting at the villa stabbed him like a knife; and he wondered, in bitter perplexity, whether, even in the urgency of the circumstances, his duty were to her or to his friend.

CHAPTER VII

JOURNEY'S END

THE car stopped smoothly.

At first Rex paid no heed, so often, since they had left the villa, had the engine changed its note, slowed down by the winding streets of shuttered townships or, as they neared Paris, by long trains of market-carts headed for the city and the coming day.

But now, for the first time on the journey, the lawyer had stirred himself. He was speaking to the chauffeur. Rex looked about him. Before them iron gates, flanked by toll-houses, stood. They had reached the Paris octroi. 'To the Préfecture,' Maître Chardon told the chauffeur.

The man nodded a silent assent and they glided into Paris. The sky was clear and powdered with stars, the moon high and growing paler, the air fresh with the water with which, from long hose-pipes, gnome-like figures in rubber boots were sluicing the asphalt. The car mounted a long, straight avenue to the Place de l'Etoile, where, beneath the majestic arch, the Unknown Soldier's grave sent up its quivering tongue of flame, and dropped swiftly down between the festoons of lights marking the Champs Elysées.

They crossed the Place de la Concorde and followed the line of the Seine quays until, behind the hump of the Pont Neuf, the black mass of the Palais de Justice and the Police Préfecture detached themselves against the night sky.

The car drew up in a quiet street beside the flowing river. In an instant the lawyer had sprung to the

ground. All his nervousness had returned. He was trembling so that he stammered as he said to his companion: 'I'll be as quick as I can. But it may take some time.'

With that he hustled across the pavement and disappeared beneath an archway where the black silhouette of a municipal guard stood sentinel. The street was very quiet. Rex sat as he had sat throughout the journey, immobile, gazing into space, oblivious of the passage of time, his thoughts far away. Thus Maître Chardon found him when, at length, the lawyer emerged at a run from the building. 'These cursed officials!' he muttered under his breath as he flung himself into the car. He glanced at his watch and snapped out an order to the chauffeur. The old clock of the Palais de Justice showed the time to be half-past three.

It was the dead hour of Paris, when restaurants and cafés are closed and only Montmartre is still lit up, when the streets, save for night birds and a few belated revelers, are deserted and the trams and 'buses have not started to run. But when, having crossed the river, they entered the Boulevard Saint-Michel they found that long and shabby thoroughfare loud with life.

Moving at a snail's pace amid belchings of rank, blue smoke, private cars and taxis poured along. From the crowded pavements a jostling throng overflowed into the roadway. And what a Bedlam throng it was! All the lower orders of Paris seemed to be abroad, the workers of 'Paname' as the apaches call their city, pallid, undersized, quick-witted, violent... And they were all headed in the same direction.

There were butchers in their striped aprons, and porters in their spreading leather hats, and fishwives, vast

of girth and scarlet of visage, from the Central Markets; bakers' hands pale, from oven heat, as their own flour; navvies in corduroys and crimson sashes from the wine docks; chestnut sellers with their smoking barrows; and newsboys with their stock of unsold evening papers buttoned up under their jackets. With them went street-walkers with their faces cold as plate-glass and their high-laced boots, and the men who prey upon them, snake-eyed, with the velvet tread of tigers; and a horde of crippled beggars, like the *Cour des Miracles* on the march, armless, legless, blind, or hideously deformed, hobbling, hopping on crutches, or, in little carriages, propelling their way through the press.

Bands of roughs, arm-in-arm with blowsy, bareheaded wenches, capered along the crowded sidewalks, shouting chaff or screeching in raucous unison some unintelligible doggerel, incessantly repeated, to that blood-quickenning chant known to generations of Parisian mob violence as the '*Air des Lampions*.' The night reeked of warm oil, gasoline, and unwashed humanity, and rang to the clatter of the motors, the babble of voices, laughter, abuse, the scrape of feet. There were police everywhere . . .

Here, in the Boul' Mich, the ex-student of the Beaux Arts was on his native heath. Rex Garrett turned to the man at his side.

'What in God's name do all these crowds mean?' he demanded.

But his companion was engaged in voluble argument with the chauffeur. The spate of traffic was dammed. All about them cars were wedged in an inextricable tangle. They had left the boulevard behind and now, ahead, from the centre of an open space bright with lights, rose the black mass of a monument. Rex recog-

nised the Lion de Belfort and knew that they had reached the Place Denfert-Rochereau.

Maître Chardon descended to the ground. 'Come,' he said to Rex, 'we can go no farther. Keep close to me!' He glanced at his watch and fairly hurled himself into the thick of the traffic.

From the end of the street a strange, angry roar, deep-throated like the bay of a mastiff, went up to the stars. As the two men were swept with the crowd into the Place, they could see, above the heads of the surging multitude, on the far side, the high silhouettes of mounted men, cloaked and helmeted, moving to and fro. They were driving back the mob that was yelling forth its rage.

The confusion of the Place was indescribable, the din bewildering. All the cafés were lit up and their lines of tables, overflowing to the very kerb, showed not a vacant seat. People were shouting for waiters, hailing their friends: there was the clatter of crockery, the chink of glass on marble, the loud drone of conversation. This Babel of sound was answered from the centre of the Place by the clamour of the crowd, the shrieks of affrighted women, and the hollow ring of horses' hoofs on the stones.

The lawyer skirted the Place and, with Rex at his heels, fought his way into a little coffee-bar, garish with coloured tiling in which blazing clusters of lights were reflected. The place was jammed to suffocation and resonant with the clack of excited voices all round the horseshoe sweep of the counter. An electric piano, jangling out 'Madelon,' added to the hubbub.

Behind the gleaming coffee-boiler a fat man in his shirt-sleeves, a towel knotted about his neck, was swabbing the zinc. On recognising the lawyer, he wiped his

hands on his neck-cloth and came out from behind the bar.

‘Tiens, Monsieur Chardon,’ he said in a confidential undertone, drawing the newcomer aside and eyeing with curiosity the lawyer’s companion, ‘one goes down there already, hein? Hear the crowd! Things are warming up outside. Soon Citizen Browning will start talking, I shouldn’t be surprised! But it’s always like that when it’s an Anarchist who’s going to sneeze through Deibler’s little window. Especially when he’s made cold meat of a cop!’ He cocked his square head, listening. ‘Aye! How they buzz, like a lot of angry wasps!’ He touched Maître Chardon’s arm. ‘This Spaniard, this Gomez, you’ll see him again before he’s introduced to “The Widow,” dites?’

The lawyer shuddered and wiped his glasses. ‘Yes, indeed. At the gaol. But I’m a little before my time...’

‘It wants more than an hour to sunrise,’ said the fat man. ‘Sit down and repose yourself, Monsieur Chardon!’

‘Is your room free, Prosper?’ asked the lawyer.

‘Always at your disposition, Monsieur Chardon,’ returned the fat man jovially. He pushed open a door behind him. ‘Voilà!’ He nudged the other with his elbow. ‘You’ll take a little glass, n’est-ce pas? You look as though you needed courage, allez: it’s the first time, I think you told me? And if you don’t want it’ — he sniggered and glanced over Chardon’s shoulder at the figure in evening dress behind — ‘sapristi! I think your friend will. His face is whiter than his shirt-front, parbleu! Allons!’

He chuckled and fetched from the counter the brandy bottle and two glasses. ‘Come!’ said the lawyer, turning

to Rex, who had stood apart all this time. Prosper led the way into the room, half office, half parlour, which opened off the bar, set down his tray, wagged his head encouragingly at Chardon and withdrew.

‘Where is this man Gomez?’ demanded Rex, as soon as the door was closed. ‘You told me you were taking me to him...’

Without replying, Maître Chardon filled one of the glasses with brandy. He was about to repeat the process with the other glass when his companion stayed him with a gesture. Chardon tossed off his brandy, drew a deep breath, brushed his bloodless lips with his handkerchief, and put on his pince-nez. Then from his pocket he drew a sealed envelope.

‘Before you ask me any questions, Monsieur Garrett,’ he said, mechanically examining the superscription of the missive, ‘I would ask you to read this document which yesterday afternoon my client, Pedro Gomez, gave me for you. When you have done so, you will tell me if you are willing to comply with the request it contains...’

‘Was it necessary to bring me to Paris to give me this?’ the other asked.

‘Read!’ said the lawyer; and handed him the letter.

Rex took the envelope. It was inscribed in French: ‘*For my friend, Rex Garrett.*’ With an impassive face the young man sat down at the table and broke the seal. The envelope contained several pages of closely written manuscript. Rex spread them out and began to read.

The lawyer helped himself to a second glass of brandy and then started to pace up and down. From time to time he cast a nervous glance at the figure at the table. From the bar drifted in the bourdon of voices, hushed

by the thickness of the door, but within the room the squeak of Maître Chardon's boots and the rustle of the paper as the man at the table turned a page were the only sounds.

The reading did not take long, and in a few minutes the lawyer saw his companion very methodically fold the manuscript and restore it to its envelope, which he put in his pocket. Then he slowly pushed back his chair and stood up.

'Eh bien?' said Chardon, stopping dead in his tracks and flicking his uncreased mourning gloves against his thigh.

Rex Garrett raised his head and looked at him. The sunbrowned face was unchangingly impassive, but the eyes were stamped with a haunted expression as though the reflection of some nameless horror lingered unfading in their depths.

'Is it time to go?' he asked.

Maître Chardon's livid countenance lit up. 'He told me you wouldn't fail him,' he murmured. Then he filled the second glass with brandy. 'Drink that up!' he ordered. 'Wait for me here! I'm going to borrow you a hat and coat...'

The first streaks of morning were in the sky as they left the bar. The Place was still seething with noise and ablaze with light, but lines of foot police, hunched up in their capes, had drawn a cordon across the far side. Out in the centre the mob still surged baying about the tossing horses of the cavalry.

Across the entrance to the Boulevard Arago a timber barricade had been erected. A police sergeant scrutinised, by the yellow shine of a lantern at his belt, the

card which Maître Chardon presented, and passed them through a wicket. Beyond the barrier the light of the street lamps glinted on the steel helmets of a company of blue-coated infantry standing at ease in the velvet gloom under the trees. A troop of cavalry went clip-clopping over the asphalt. Police cyclists, revolver at belt, pedalled noiselessly by. Under the eyes of fidgety civilians, recognisable at a glance as plain-clothes men, the lawyer and his charge passed a second barrier and a third. Between two high discoloured walls the Boulevard Arago stretched its length before them.

Here, after the turmoil of the Place, it was very peaceful. Behind them, where the bright lights of the cafés threw an orange glare on the greying sky, they heard the distant rumble of the traffic, the shouting and the laughter and, like the bass of an organ, the deep growling note of the mob. The approach of dawn had brought a little cold breeze and the chilly air was fragrant with the scent of the white blossoms which, like candles on a Christmas tree, brightened the ancient horse-chestnuts that bordered the kerb.

Some way along the boulevard more troops were massed in dark blots. They were in square formation with one side, that on the left of the street, kept open. The cavalry were dismounted, the men shivering under their cloaks and gossiping in undertones, the officers strolling to and fro smoking cigarettes. From somewhere within the square, beyond the lines of soldiers, came the sound of hammering.

As they went along, Chardon nudged Rex, pointing to the lofty wall on the right-hand side of the boulevard. 'The Santé Prison,' he said.

His harsh, rather rasping voice fell on a strange and

brooding hush which rested over that twilight avenue. Men spoke in whispers, and the rustle of voices was no louder than the stirring of the breath of morning in the trees. Pacing feet rang hollow on the asphalt; from time to time, with a jingle of chain, a horse stamped. Out of the far distance came the very faint drone of the mob. Against this background of muted sounds the crashing hammerblows reverberated with nerve-racking insistence . . .

And then they saw it, standing out against the milked wall, with its twin posts, tall and black, pointing, like avenging fingers, to heaven, and, at the top, the great triangular blade of dull blue steel — a curiously foreshortened, trim, and well-carpentered machine. A lantern, in which a wick faintly glimmered, stood on the sidewalk and by its light dim figures tapped and tested and adjusted. At the kerb a covered van was waiting, drawn by a venerable white horse. The back of the van was open and from it a man was dragging forth a long, flat basket . . .

As from the far distance a voice spoke in Rex Garrett's ear. He turned and found himself looking into Maître Chardon's ghastly face.

'If you stand by the kerb,' the lawyer was whispering, 'he'll see you as he gets out of the van. I must leave you now' — he began to thrust his fingers into his shiny black gloves — 'I'm awaited at the prison. We may not meet again.' His features were haggard with perplexity and his little lizard eyes blinked. 'I . . . I scarcely feel that I shall have the courage to return . . .' He suddenly wrung the other's hand and padded away.

The sky was lemon with the coming of the light . . .

The first rays of the sun were slanting athwart the

horse-chestnut blossoms and flaming in the topmost windows of the prison. The birds were chirruping and whirring in the trees. The boulevard was bathed in rosy glow. Commands, raucously rolling, had sent the lines of infantry rippling to attention. From beyond the distant barriers the ceaseless murmur of the crowd stole over the still air like the boom of waves against a reef.

But along the avenue a leaden and mournful silence reigned. It was broken only by the measured hoofbeats of an old white horse and the rumble of the wheels of a covered van wherein, bound with cords, a swarthy, black-haired man, dressed like a French workman, hocked between two guards.

Officials, journalists, military, police, breathlessly watched the slow descent of those hobbled feet to the ground. They saw hot black eyes range swiftly over the frieze of uneasy faces; they heard, in the pregnant hush, a clear voice say in French:

‘Thank you, my friend!’

None knew save one to whom the words were spoken. But a square-shouldered detective, fingering his blond moustache by the kerb, noticed that a young man with tragic eyes, who stood beside him, turned his back on the scaffold before the knife fell.

CHAPTER VIII

AN EARLY CALL ON MARCIA

WITH its crimson damask walls, Brummagem Louis Seize sconces, and pretentious gilt furniture; with its Bon-Marché prints of shepherdesses and silken curtains of cloying pink, Mrs. Hadrian Greer's bedroom in the vast hotel where she made her Paris headquarters was as banal as only the bedroom of a modern *hôtel de luxe* can be.

'All these places have the same sort of rooms,' she used to lament to Sally, her fat, good-humoured face screwed up into an expression of comic dismay. 'You go to bed in Brussels or Madrid, but when you wake up you might as well be in New York or Honolulu for all the difference there is in the view from your pillow.'

In exchanging the charming taste of Les Ormes for the meretricious glitter of her Paris suite, Marcia Greer had made a considerable sacrifice. With all the cold contempt of a collector of Chippendale and Sheraton, she detested bergère chairs, gold beds, torch-bearing Cupids and Buhl tables. She was a woman of principle, however, and, where Sally's happiness was the object, did not count a fortnight's rhapsody in pink too high a price to set upon her affection.

But with this last act of devotion, she told herself, her whole duty to Sally Candlin was accomplished. She was quite clear in her mind about that. Genially, as she did everything, Marcia Greer had washed her hands of Sally.

She was very fond of Sally; but she was a little dis-

appointed in her. She knew she had taken the girl away from Madame Clémentine's to suit her own convenience; for Marcia Greer had reached that stage in life where a woman begins to discover that it is hard to grow old alone. She had expected her companion to get married one day and leave her; but somehow she had always assumed that the marriage would be of her contrivance and not of Sally's.

Mrs. Greer was what is often called the soul of good nature. But, like many good-natured people, she had an indolent disposition. While she would not shrink from sacrificing her personal comfort to help a friend, she declined at any cost to have her mental complacency disturbed. What with modern fashions, and the pitiless diet they entailed, life was already sufficiently complicated for a widow of a certain age. She had her figure to think of, and the encroachments of that deadly enemy of matrons, double chin. She felt herself quite incapable of battling against the determination of a headstrong girl.

And throughout her love affair Sally had displayed a strength of mind which had at first disconcerted and then faintly irritated her employer. During the eighteen months they had been together, Marcia had grown to think of her companion only in reference to herself. It had never occurred to her that this lovely creature, always devoted, never out of temper, had a will of her own. And so, when Rex Garrett came on the scene and Sally suddenly stood up before her, vital, glowing, resolute, Diana the Huntress personified, Marcia was flabbergasted. She attempted a feeble protest and then, almost without a struggle, collapsed.

Nevertheless she felt she owed a duty to the girl, a

duty, however, circumscribed by Sally's plain intention of marrying Rex, with or without Marcia's consent. Sally had chosen, and the older woman considered herself morally obliged to see that the choice carried with it a reasonable chance of happiness. This duty of hers, however, Marcia believed, was amply fulfilled when she had ascertained from her Cannes friend, the Baron de Foix, that Rex Garrett was honourably known in art circles in Paris as an artist with an assured future and from the young man himself that, although his parents were dead and he was without expectations, he was earning a comfortable income from his painting. In her own mind she was satisfied that the suitor was disinterested, though she had a guilty feeling that she should have left him in no doubt concerning Sally's true status. But the girl's resolution cowed her, and rather than compromise matters, rather than expose her peace of mind to the upset of a love affair gone wrong, she took a risk — a very little risk, she assured herself — and held her peace. After all, the responsibility was Sally's, not hers, as she told the girl quite frankly.

'With your looks, my dear,' she had said, 'you could have married anybody. If you choose to fling yourself away on an artist, that's your affair. Your young man is charming; he has talent and he makes enough money to support you comfortably. But, this said, the fact remains that, instead of having your house on Long Island, or in Park Lane, or your palace on the Grand Canal, you're going to grub it in a cottage in one of the least fashionable parts of the Riviera. I want to see you happy, Sally, dear, and with all my heart I wish you luck. But if you come to regret your decision you mustn't blame me!'

Her protest made, Marcia, with her accustomed good nature, was prepared to leave nothing undone to see Sally safely married. The organisation of the ceremony had been entrusted to her, and as now, on the morning after the wedding, she lay in bed in her Louis Seize suite, she realised that she was quite worn out. After all, it makes an inordinate demand on the vitality even of an American matron of forty, passport time, to be called upon at short notice to fill all subaltern offices at a marriage function. Not even the duties of best man had been spared her. Did she not have to push Rupert Forsdyke, Rex Garrett's muddle-headed artist friend, through his part?

Tired as she was when she went to bed, she had slept badly. All through the night she was plagued by a confused repetition of the day's events, a phantasmagoria of changing faces and shifting scenes. She had an odd feeling that she ought to rouse herself, but she deliberately prolonged the interval between sleeping and waking, slipping to and fro across the frontier of dream-land.

She fancied herself back at Sally's wedding. But the bridegroom was oddly different. When she looked closer, she saw it was Hadrian, poor Hadrian who had been in his grave in Baltimore these fifteen years. And this Hadrian was not the portly cotton-broker she best remembered, but a slimmer, a more gallant figure, buttoned into a long frock coat. Then the background melted; and in place of the staid interior of the American Church in Paris, she recognised the walls of her mother's drawing-room in Philadelphia, festooned with roses, as she had seen it long ago on her own wedding day. But Hadrian was missing; and she was there alone,

facing Dr. Curtis, the clergyman, in her long-trained gown and white veil, dreadfully embarrassed because she had suddenly remembered she was wearing her bed-socks. And Dr. Curtis was scowling at her, scowling and tapping his arm with his prayer-book and crying: 'Marcia, wake up!'

She opened her eyes. The room was flooded with sunshine. Through the open windows mounted the cheerful murmur of Paris beginning a new day. Someone was shaking her arm and calling her by her name. It was Sally.

Marcia smiled sleepily. 'Hello, honey!' she said in a drowsy voice. Funny, that Sally had taken off her wedding ring! She was wearing the clothes in which she had gone away—a plain fawn sports suit under a biscuit-coloured overcoat and a little fawn hat. There was dust on her face and dust on the riband of her hat...

Realisation seemed to come like a flash to Marcia. In an instant she was wide awake. With consternation in her gaze, she stared at the girl.

'Sally!' she exclaimed, aghast. She cast a swift glance at the travelling-clock ticking by the bedside. 'Only half-past seven! What on earth are you doing here?'

Now that Marcia had waked up, Sally was looking away. She sat on the edge of the bed, her eyes cast down, her fingers idly picking at the lustrous eiderdown.

'Marcia, he's left me!' she said in a low voice.

Mrs. Greer popped her head out from behind the eiderdown which, on finding Sally at her bedside, she had drawn up to her eyes. She presented an extraordinary, not to say a terrifying, appearance.

She was wearing a little net cap, with ear-pieces, to

keep her shingled hair in order and her jaws were bound up with a red rubber band, first line of defence against Chin, the enemy. The effect of these apparatus, combined with the high-necked and shroud-like dun-coloured nightdress she affected, was to endow her with an eerie and macabre air, like a Pharaoh embalmed and wrapped for the tomb. In the mummy-like apparition which now struggled into a sitting position in the bed, subscribers to Monday evenings at the Metropolitan Opera would scarcely have recognised the fashionable and fascinating Mrs. Hadrian Greer.

'Left you?' repeated Marcia in accents of utter amazement. *'My dear child, what are you saying?'*

Sally did not look up. *'It's my own fault,'* she said bleakly. *'I should have told him before...'*

'My dear Sally,' Marcia interrupted, *'do you wish me to understand that Rex Garrett has gone off and left you? On your wedding night?'*

Sally bowed her head without speaking.

With a gesture of extreme decision Mrs. Greer flung the bedclothes from her, bounced out of bed, kicked off her bed-socks, thrust her feet into her slippers, and plumped down beside the girl, draping the eiderdown about her shoulders. She put an arm about the slim young waist.

'How did it happen?' she demanded.

The girl made a little weary movement of the head.

'I told him the truth,' she answered slowly. *'I had to, Marcia,'* she went on, noticing the other's face. *'And he went away.'*

Marcia's black eyes snapped and her large mouth settled itself into a thin, grim line.

'I knew it!' she proclaimed impressively. *'You can't*

say I didn't warn you, Sally Candlin. Didn't I implore you to leave well alone? Didn't I, tired as I was, sit down in this very room after you'd gone yesterday afternoon and write you out a wire begging you once again to leave well alone? But you won't take advice! My poor Sally, you're headstrong! That's what's the matter with you!'

'Oh, Marcia,' said the girl piteously. 'Don't scold me. I've been such a wretched little fool!'

Marcia's ill humour, which had been nothing more than the expression of the shock to her nerves, dissolved like a puff of smoke. She settled her arm more comfortably round Sally's waist.

'Well, well,' she said, 'let me hear the rest of it. When did you tell him?'

'Last night after dinner...'

'And how did he take it?'

The girl turned her head aside, biting her lip.

'He was rather hurt at our... at my deceiving him. But he said the money would make no difference. And in the end he kissed me. And I thought everything was all right. I went upstairs to bed; he stayed behind in the garden to finish his cigar. I waited for him until nearly one o'clock. Then I went and looked in the dressing-room, downstairs, in the garden, everywhere.' Her lips trembled. 'He was gone...'

'Well!' exclaimed Marcia with a deep gasp. 'If that doesn't beat everything! I thought I knew something about men; but this Rex of yours certainly had me fooled. Did he warn you he was going to do this?'

Sally shook her head.

'Did he leave no message? No note or anything?'

The same resigned headshake.

‘Didn’t he take his clothes? He was dressed for dinner, I suppose — did he rush away just as he was?’

‘He must have. His hat and overcoat are there in the hall and his other clothes in the dressing-room, as far as I could judge...’

‘But how did he go? Did he take the car?’

‘No. I drove myself up in the car just now.’

Mrs. Greer planted her plump hands flat in her lap. The expression of utter dismay on her broad, humorous face, together with her chin-strap, made her look rather like a sick Pekinese with its head tied up in flannel.

‘Pre... posterous!’ she boomed. ‘The young generation is perfectly shameless. I never heard of such behaviour in my life. Because he discovers that he has to support you himself, the scoundrel simply walks off and abandons you...’

Sally shrugged her shoulders in a little hopeless movement.

‘I don’t know what his motives are.’ Her voice deepened. ‘But I do blame myself.’

‘Motives?’ Marcia broke in scornfully. ‘His motives are as plain as my face, my dear. The fellow’s a common adventurer!’

Sally looked at her earnestly.

‘Marcia, he wasn’t acting a part last night. When he said that the money would make no difference, I’m sure he meant it. Until dawn came I sat up on the divan in the bedroom at the villa puzzling my brains to discover why he has done this thing. Perhaps he counted on a wealthy marriage to save him from some financial disaster and he had to flee when he found out his mistake; maybe he thinks that I...’ — her voice faltered — ‘that I am an adventuress...’

It is not polite to say of a middle-aged lady that she grunts, but this is the only verb to describe the sound which issued forth from Mrs. Greer's lips. Then, 'Don't the servants at the villa know anything?' she demanded.

The girl's wan face flamed suddenly.

'I didn't disturb them. They were in bed and asleep. As soon as it was light, I packed my things and came away.' She hesitated. 'Marcia, dearest, I know you think I've been very pig-headed, very...very ungrateful. But I'm going to beg one more favour of you, and it's the last.' She began twisting her fingers together nervously. 'You'll...you'll find some explanation, Marcia? That's what I came here to ask. There mustn't be any gossip.' With a desperate, pleading air she gazed appealingly into the fat, perplexed face at her side. There were violet shadows about her eyes. 'Marcia, please, you'll try and prevent people from talking?'

Her voice quivered, and, with a dreadful eagerness, she seemed to hang upon her friend's reply. Marcia's small eyes glowered.

'There won't be any talk, my dear,' was her rather grim promise, 'except what that young man's going to hear from me. The first thing to do is to discover what's become of him...' So saying, she put forth her hand to the telephone which stood beside the bed.

Sally sprang up in alarm. 'What are you going to do?'

'Call Rupert Forsdyke,' answered Marcia, the receiver to her ear, 'and have him find Rex!'

The girl snatched the telephone from her friend and replaced it on its hook.

'No,' she said passionately, 'no, no, no!'

Grabbing the eiderdown, which kept slipping off her

shoulders, the older woman leaned back and stared. 'Why, Sally!' she exclaimed.

'I don't want him back,' the girl announced in a low, tense voice.

Marcia's mouth folded itself into peevish puckers.

'You're married to him,' she declared bluntly. 'He may be an adventurer, but he's your husband now. We've got to see him and ask him what he proposes to do. He can't be allowed to behave like this...'

'I never wish to see him again,' said Sally.

'Well, I declare,' ejaculated Marcia, 'and just now you were defending him!' She glanced sharply at the girl. 'I believe you're still in love with the fellow. Are you?'

Sally was silent. In proud isolation she stood in the centre of the room with heightened colour, feigning to scrutinise her nails. Mrs. Greer shook her head compassionately. The girl's deadly calm impressed her more than any outburst would have done. For the moment Marcia was dominated by her genuine sympathy for Sally in her plight. She even lost sight of the fact that the even tenor of her life was in the very act of being rudely disturbed.

'Sit down, honey,' said the older woman, patting the bed at her side. 'I want to talk to you.' Reluctantly, Sally obeyed. 'Now, see here,' Mrs. Greer resumed, 'I'm not going to say another word against Rex Garrett. You know what I think. Maybe I'm wrong and you're right. Perhaps he's as disinterested as I thought he was and has just flounced off because he was mad at being deceived. All the more reason, therefore, for hearing what he has to say. For the present what you want is to have a bath, some breakfast here with me, and

a long rest in bed. You look all in, I declare, you poor thing! By the time you wake up, Master Rex'll be waiting on the mat and . . .'

The golden head was shaken stubbornly.

'I don't want ever to see him again!'

'But, Sally . . .'

'It's no good, Marcia. My mind's made up!'

'But, child, what are you going to do?'

'I'm going back to work, Marcia . . .'

Mrs. Greer clicked despairingly.

'If you'd only try not to be so obstinate! Let me get hold of Rex and hear his explanation . . .'

Sally jumped to her feet.

'And have him believe, after what's happened, that I've sent you to fetch him back?' she burst forth passionately. 'Do you think I've got no pride? Listen to me! I made Rex Garrett ask me to marry him. God, what a damned fool I was! I threw myself at his head because I loved him so, without ever stopping to consider whether he really cared for me. I saw he was attracted, I suppose, and . . . oh, well, I just fooled myself into believing he loved me. Didn't you guess the real reason why I wouldn't tell him the truth before? I wasn't sure of him, that was why, and I was afraid to take the risk.' A sob choked her utterance. 'And I was right, Marcia, I was right,' she said miserably. 'When the test came, he failed me. And to think that, before he went away, he pretended that he cared, just to let me down easy. Oh, I feel humiliated to the very earth!'

She broke off and, snatching up her gloves, began to pull them on with nervous, jerky movements. Marcia's eyes were glistening.

'Sally, darling,' she began, 'if I'd had any idea . . .'

The telephone beside the bed interrupted her with a shattering peal. The two women exchanged a significant glance.

‘If it’s Rex,’ said Sally suddenly and desperately, ‘you’re not to tell him I’m here, Marcia!’

Again the telephone whirred. Marcia turned away and lifted the receiver.

‘Mrs. Hadrian Greer speaking,’ she announced.

At once a high-pitched, rather excited voice came back to her across the wire.

‘I say, is that Mrs. Greer? This is Rupert Forsdyke: you know, Rex Garrett’s best... oh, you do remember me? I say, Mrs. Greer, Rex went off on his honeymoon all right, didn’t he?’

‘Why, yes...’

‘Then what does he want with my bags?’

‘Your bags? Do you mean valises... grips?’

‘No! My trousers...’

‘Your *trousers*, Mr. Forsdyke?’

‘Yes! My only decent pair of grey flannel bags. And a Norfolk jacket. I’ve just come in from a party and I was going to change into those bags to play golf and...’

‘But how do you know that it’s Rex who’s taken your trousers?’

‘Because he’s left his evening clothes here. He must have come round to the studio devilish early: he knows I keep the key under the mat...’

‘Did he leave any message?’

‘Nothing! I say, Mrs. Greer, I thought the happy couple were down at your villa. What’s old Rex doing in Paris?’

‘I don’t know, Mr. Forsdyke...’

‘But what’s the explanation?’

‘There is no explanation, Mr. Forsdyke...’

‘But I say, Mrs. Greer...’

‘Come and lunch with me at the hotel at half-past twelve and we’ll try and find one...’

Marcia rang off — and turned to find Sally gone.

She hunched the eiderdown about her shoulders and sighed heavily. Even in the sweet service of love a New York society leader cannot be expected to pursue head-strong damsels along the corridors of fashionable hotels in a mob-cap and chin-strap, draped in a pink silk coverlet. So, under the seraphic smirk of the Bon-Marché shepherdesses, Marcia crept back into bed even as the telephone pealed out once more.

Knowing, as a woman of experience, that time will mend anything, Mrs. Hadrian Greer quietly slipped the receiver off the hook and composed herself to sleep again.

As Sally walked quickly through the hotel vestibule to gain her car parked in the early morning sunshine of the street, a young man in a dark suit with a blond moustache and very square shoulders left the desk and blocked her way. Lifting his hat he said in very fair English: ‘You are Mrs. Garrett?’

Sally glanced round. The day porter, who knew her well, had just come on duty and was sorting letters at the desk. She realised it would be idle to deny her identity.

‘I am,’ the girl answered unwillingly.

‘Can you tell me where I can find your husband?’ asked the man politely.

‘But who are you,’ Sally countered, ‘and what do you want with Mr. Garrett?’

The man produced a card.

‘Inspector Barbier, of the Sûreté Générale,’ he said with a little bow. ‘I belong to the Paris detective force, madame, and I wish to put certain questions to Monsieur Garrett.’

‘I am sorry I cannot help you,’ Sally replied. ‘My husband has left me...’

The man gave her a piercing glance out of eyes as bright as a bird’s.

‘But you were married only yesterday...’ he expostulated.

‘Mr. Garrett has left me,’ she repeated.... ‘And I don’t know what has become of him. I have nothing more to say.’

The detective made no attempt to detain her and she passed out through the swing door to her car.

CHAPTER IX

A MEETING AND WHAT CAME OF IT

HAD Sally been calmer, she might have stayed to question Inspector Barbier. But the thought uppermost in her mind was to get away and be alone, like a wounded animal that crawls into a thicket to die. The abrupt irruption of the police into the smoking ruins of her castle in the air added a sordid touch to the shattering of her romance which she felt to be the final degradation.

She had answered the detective at random. If she had disassociated herself from Rex, it was not from any vindictive prompting or any lack of moral courage, but, on the contrary, from a sort of subconscious resolve to short-circuit any attempt to extract from her information tending to embarrass or endanger this man who was her husband. On Rex Garrett's motives in deserting her she would not dwell. All that mattered to her was that she loved this man and he would have none of her; her only plan to flee and hide her shame in obscurity.

She had about a thousand dollars in the bank, savings from Marcia's generous dress allowance, and a lavish supply of clothes. After the honeymoon she and Rex had planned to spend the summer at his cottage in the Esterel: and her surplus trunks, ready packed, were in the baggage-room at the hotel where she had intended to collect them on her way to the South. She had asked the night porter to have this luggage put in the back of the car while she was upstairs with Marcia. When she left the hotel, therefore, everything was prepared for her flight.

She had told Marcia she was going back to work. She had a definite plan. At Madame Clémentine's in New York she had made friends with Olga Suvorine, a Russian, whom the tidal wave of the Bolshevik Revolution had cast upon the shores of the New World. In the nightmare confusion of the evacuation of Odessa, with the red hordes breathing fire and slaughter at the very gates of the city, Olga had been parted from her husband, a major on the staff of Denikin's army, and for many months believed him dead. Then, without warning, the Major had turned up in Paris, where he had started a dress-shop, and had sent for his wife to join him. Sally meant to make Olga give her a job.

She could think of no arrangement better suited to what was in her mind. She knew she was treating Marcia badly in thus running away without trace; but Marcia was the direct link with that bitter passage in her life on which she was turning her back. If Rex wanted to locate her — it angered her to discover how the mere thought thrilled! — it was to Marcia he would turn. And so Marcia must not know where she was.

Marcia did not know about Suvorine's. She had always set her face against her companion resuming connections with her old occupation. On coming to Paris, Sally had looked up Olga and had been rapturously welcomed; and whenever she was in Paris she found time to call at Suvorine's. But she had not mentioned these visits to Marcia. And Suvorine's was off Marcia's usual shopping beat, in the rue de la Pompe, that attractive street which is like a slice of the rue de la Paix set down in a Paris suburb.

Sally was sure she could count on Olga. The Russian was kind-hearted and, apart from their old friendship,

knew how reluctant Madame Clémentine had been to see Sally go. Moreover, the Paris season was in full swing and all the dressmakers were engaging extra hands.

From the hotel Sally drove herself to a boarding-house near the Champ de Mars, in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower, a place she had heard spoken of as cheap, clean, and reasonably comfortable. There she booked a room and deposited her trunks. She stayed only long enough to brush the dust off her clothes and tidy up before starting out again.

She took a 'bus to the rue de la Pompe; the car, which had been Marcia's wedding present, she left in a garage. One did not go looking for work in a brand-new Talbot! Olga, the soul of tact, hugged her and asked no questions. By ten o'clock she was installed as saleswoman at Suvorine's on a salary of a thousand francs a month plus ten per cent commission.

Within a very few days she began to feel the soothing effect of a definite occupation. Without a pang for the life she had left, she slipped back into her place in this milieu she knew so well. The familiar surroundings in themselves were as a sedative: the planned disorder of the long show-room, a dainty frock over a chair, a bright scarf on a table, deliberately left there to attract the eye; the warm air subtly fragrant with perfume; the constant, high babble of French; the mannequins' slow, disdainful posturings; the jargon of the atelier.

Now she understood what had been lacking in the life of ease she had quitted; what had driven her, hot-blooded and vibrant, to escape from a parasitic existence where she had no individual entity, into this quest for love that had cost her her heart. She was not happy — she seemed to be aware, without realising it, that hap-

piness had passed from her ken, like a friend who dies abroad; but as the days passed by and a glorious June waxed full, she was less definitely miserable.

Her break-away seemed to have succeeded. At any rate, Marcia made no sign, and of Rex there was no word. Deliberately, now, Sally let her thoughts dwell on him, emboldened to accustom her heart to the stab of pain which the memory of that May night always brought her. Little by little, as her senses threw off their numbness, she felt a little stirring of curiosity. What was it that had set the police upon his track and led him to abandon her? For she doubted not that his disappearance and Inspector Barbier's mission were connected. She often pondered on the problem: without any sentimental interest, she assured herself, but merely because it intrigued her to speculate as to how her matrimonial entanglement would end.

And then she met Rupert Forsdyke and knew in a flash that all her brave philosophy was a sham.

It was on a Saturday afternoon, her weekly half-holiday, and she was crossing the Pont Alexandre III on her way to Passy to spend the evening with the Suvorines. A loud cry of 'Sally!' rang out suddenly from the roadway, and, stopping short, she saw Rupert's lanky figure scrambling out of a horse-cab. Her first impulse was to avoid him; but before she had time to escape he stood before her and was shaking her two hands in his.

'I say, I say,' he gurgled joyfully; 'I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw you trottin' along just now! The time we've had, Mrs. Greer and I, huntin' for you! My gracious goodness, where have you been hidin' all these weeks?'

In the fortnight she had spent in Paris before her wed-

ding, Sally had seen a good deal of Rupert Forsdyke. She liked Rupert. He was a gentleman, and contrived in the vicissitudes of a life of almost inconceivable disorder never to forget it. He was fifty, and grey-haired, and shabby; without talent as he was without money; but never without hope. Usually penniless, harassed by creditors, sponged upon by every harpy of the Latin Quarter and constantly involved in mysterious and often stormy love episodes, he walked in a world of the rosiest dreams which lifted his head to the stars. He was never depressed, never out of temper, never accomplishing anything, always about to begin.

His studio was a frowzy barrack behind a timber-yard in the Avenue du Maine where he camped amongst broken furniture, unwashed crockery, and stacks of unfinished or unsold canvases. Yet, though his shirt might be ragged, it was always clean; and his appearance showed that a daily tub and shave were yet of his habits, a side of him that appealed to Sally. What appealed to her even more strongly was the fact that he was Rex Garrett's most intimate friend in Paris, with a tremendous belief in Rex and his painting.

The sound of Rupert's voice made Sally suddenly glad she had not run away. The high-pitched, rather affected drawl seemed to bring Rex nearer.

'I've been in Paris all the while,' she answered, and gave him a dazzling smile. She was resolved he should not think that Rex mattered to her.

'Look here, Sally,' said Rupert — Rex had insisted on the use of Christian names between them — 'I want to talk to you...' He slipped his arm confidently in hers and began to walk her along the bridge towards the shining mass of the Grand Palais. But at that moment

a strident cry of '*Rupaire!*' resounded behind them.

Rupert clapped his hand to his brow and swung round sharply.

'Lordie!' he ejaculated. 'I forgot Emmeline!'

Sally followed the direction of his eyes and descried peering over the back of the cab he had left standing in the roadway, an indignant girl's face, white as chalk and gashed by a scarlet smear of a mouth, set in a frame of jet-black hair cut square like a medieval Florentine's.

Rupert gazed at Sally hopelessly.

'I can't let you go now that I've found you,' he remarked. He jerked his head in the direction of the cab. 'I was goin' to take *her* out to dinner. She's... she's inclined to be hot-tempered, is Emmeline.' With a perplexed air, he began to smooth the back of his head. 'I wonder now whether you'd care to lend me twenty francs. You see, I must talk to you. Only there's Emmeline to be considered. She's rather fond of me, but she likes money better. Unfortunately, I've only got a louis on me. I don't think that'd be enough. But forty francs probably... oh, thanks awfully!' With his charming smile he took the note which Sally offered. 'Remind me to jot this down in my little book, there's a good girl! Now don't go away, will you? I'll be with you in a jiffy...'

'I'll wait!' said Sally, and wondered why she had promised. She did not watch Rupert's return to the cab, although she was conscious of suspicious eyes boring into her from the back. She heard the rapid rattle of irascible French behind her, like a burst of machine-gun fire, and began to walk on slowly.

Presently Rupert caught up with her. 'Whew,' he remarked, fanning himself with his battered old felt, 'some

women are so infernally possessive! Let's go and sit down somewhere in the cool, shall we? There are a thousand things I have to say to you . . .'

His dreamy eyes snatched at a beautiful vision of this charming girl and himself seated on a shining marble bench in the shade of a screen of tall cypresses with the blue glint of a sunlit sea in between. It made him forget the warm rasp of the asphalt through the hole in his shoe. He saw himself, as a man of the world, wise in the knowledge of woman, giving shrewd and kindly advice to this wayward damsel.

They found chairs under the trees beside the Seine and sat down. 'Your pal, Mrs. Greer, will be devilish glad to know I've found you,' he observed.

'Listen, Rupert,' said Sally, 'I'm not going back to Marcia and, for the present, I'd rather she didn't know where to find me. I wrote and thanked her again for all her great goodness to me and told her I'd found a job . . .'

'I know,' he rejoined. 'But she's worried about you. In fact, she fretted so much that she started puttin' on weight. Worry always makes her eat, she says. Now she's gone to Vichy. She's got twelve pounds to knock off . . .'

Sally smiled. 'Poor Marcia! Her diet always gave her trouble. She used to get so hungry . . .'

'Rex will be glad, too,' Rupert added tentatively; and watched her face.

She froze.

'He gave me a message for you, Sally . . .'

'You've . . . you've seen him?' she questioned, and strove to give her voice an indifferent ring. He shook his head. 'He wrote to me, a few lines in pencil writ-

ten in the train, I should say; posted in Bordeaux. I received his note the day after you went away. He asked me to tell you he could explain everything, but he must be absent for a month and would you trust him until he came back...'

Sally was contemplating her neat, snake-skin shoes. Her silence was uncompromising, her manner icy.

'He's crazy for news of you,' Rupert put in warmly. 'Every week he writes to know if I've seen you...'

'Where is he?' The question was nonchalant.

'I don't know!'

She looked up in surprise. 'You don't know? Then how can you communicate with him?'

Rupert hesitated.

'There can't be any harm in your knowing,' he answered slowly. 'I'm to shove an unsigned advertisement in the Paris *Daily Mail* under the heading "Avenue du Maine"; that's where my studio is, you know...'

'But where does he write from?' Her interest had quickened.

'His letters are postmarked either San Sebastian or Saint-Jean-de-Luz.' He paused. 'Dear lady Sally,' he went on warmly, 'I know jolly well what you and Mrs. Greer have got in your heads about the poor old chap. But it ain't true. Rex is no adventurer. He don't care any more about money than I do. I know him so well. He's told me nothing. I haven't the foggiest notion what he's playing at, what his bolt from Paris and all this secrecy business mean. But I can tell you this. If Rex went off and left you on your weddin' night, he had a mighty strong reason for it, you can lay to that...!'

She nodded absently, her chin propped on her hand.

‘Was there any money trouble?’ she asked.

‘Money trouble, my foot!’ retorted Rupert emphatically. ‘Rex made plenty of money. Why, only the day before you were married, he tried to lend me a hundred quid just because an infuriated Frog was kicking up a dust at the studio about some mouldy bill or other...’

‘Was there...is there...another woman?’

‘Oh, my dear,’ Rupert broke in quickly, ‘you’ve no idea how the dear old boy worships you. No woman has ever mattered to him before and, if you ask me, no woman will ever matter except you. Rex has never messed about after skirts. Other woman? Of course there’s no other woman. You can put that idea right out of that pretty head of yours...’

She dropped her hands in her lap with a sort of despairing gesture.

‘Then...why?’ she questioned, almost under her breath.

‘I don’t know,’ he answered frankly; ‘I’m as much in the dark as you are...’

‘Did you know that the police are looking for him?’

‘The police!’ Rupert was aghast.

Then Sally told him of her interview with Inspector Barbier.

‘My hat!’ ejaculated her companion. ‘So that’s why he borrowed my trousers. I didn’t tell you that Rex called at the studio on the morning after the wedding while I was out and changed into some duds of mine, did I? Obviously, he was leavin’ Paris at the trot. By...Jove!’ He stopped reflectively, pursing up his lips.

‘What?’ the girl demanded.

‘Why, don’t you see? That explains San Sebastian, Saint-Jean-de-Luz . . . !’

‘How?’

Rupert drew his chair closer and looked into her eyes. ‘Didn’t old Rex ever tell you he was born in the Basque country?’ he said.

She stared at him in wonderment. ‘No! I’m not sure I even know exactly where the Basque country is . . .’

‘It’s the Pyrenees, on both sides of the frontier between France and Spain: Biarritz, San Sebastian, Saint-Jean-de-Luz, all about there.’

‘I always thought Rex was born in England . . .’

‘He was brought up there. But he was born in France, somewhere among the Basques. He was adopted when he was a nipper and taken over to England. He don’t talk much about his early days, but he told me this once. That’s why he speaks French so well. Look here, now, if one wanted to lie doggo for a bit, the Basque country would be the very place. They’re all mountaineers in those parts, smugglers, bandits, and God knows what, as thick as thieves and tremendously loyal to one another — Flora MacDonald and the Highlanders, you know the style of thing . . .’

He broke off. A delightful picture had just lit up in his mind, of Rex, incredibly hirsute and ragged, sheltering in a mountain hut at the mouth of a narrow and precipitous defile, and faithful clansmen, with the slouch hats, cloaks, blunderbusses, other apparatus of professional banditry, watching the pass.

Sally was silent, too. She, also, was thinking of Rex, of Rex at the dinner-table on their wedding night, trying to tell her about this early life of his. Suddenly her eyes filled with tears. She stood up abruptly.

‘Good-bye, Rupert,’ she said and held out her hand.

He sprang up from his chair in alarm. ‘God bless me,’ he exclaimed, ‘you’re not off already?’ And as she nodded a wistful assent, he went on: ‘You’ll tell me, at least, where I can find you?’

She shook her head, biting her lip to keep back the tears.

‘But, my gracious,’ he protested, ‘you’ll let me see you again? I might have some news for you...’

‘I may write,’ she told him in a husky voice.

‘But, look here, about Rex . . . what are you going to do?’

Her brimming eyes gazed forlornly into his.

‘I don’t know,’ she answered. And then, with a sort of wail, she burst out: ‘Oh, Rupert, for goodness’ sake go away! Can’t you see I want to cry?’

Blank dismay screwed his battered face into a thousand wrinkles. ‘Sorry!’ he muttered, twisting the rim of his old brown hat in his fingers. He opened his mouth to say something further, changed his mind, took a pace backward, then, turning on his heel, walked rapidly away...

She might deceive Rupert. She could not deceive herself. She knew what she was going to do. She had known it from the moment that Rupert had mentioned those letters from San Sebastian, from Saint-Jean-de-Luz. She had known it all along, all the weary days she had waited for the chance of discovering, without the sacrifice of her pride, whither her lover had fled. Two days later, with sixty litres of petrol in the tank and a suitcase and a hatbox in the back, she was bowling along in the Talbot headed for the Pyrenees.

CHAPTER X

TEA WITH DOÑA INOCENCIA

SEÑORITA PILAR DE ZUBIETA Y LOPEZ sat with her mamma in the hall of the hotel and watched the smart folk drifting in to tea. The season at San Sebastian was yet young. Though the hotels were only beginning to fill up, most of the villas of the Spanish aristocracy were open against the arrival of the Court in a few weeks' time.

There had been a *matinée* at the Casino, this warm Sunday afternoon, in aid of the Spanish wounded in Morocco and everybody who was anybody in San Sebastian had been present. The lounge of the Hôtel Cosmopolite was thronged with people in summer clothes drinking tea or sipping cocktails. At their backs, through the open doors of the terrace, the bay, like a sickle of deep blue steel, lay spread out in the sunset which flamed between the tamarisks of the Paseo de la Concha. But no one paid any attention to the view. All eyes were drawn to the revolving door which, at the opposite end of the hall, with a dull rumble discharged a steady stream of elegance.

Señorita Pilar had not been to the *matinée*. Instead, as befits a young lady brought up at the most expensive convent school of Bogota, she had been taken to Benediction at Santa Maria. It was with rather an envious eye that she considered the fashionable assemblage.

‘Look, Mamma,’ she said presently — she spoke in French so as not to parade her sibilant South American Spanish before this Castilian gathering — ‘look! Doña Inocencia!’

Her mother, an immense female with the physiognomy of a peon, glanced up from her knitting. A woman, beautiful, slender, and exceedingly well-groomed, had just entered through the revolving door.

‘Oui, ma chérie,’ replied Mamma placidly.

‘I think she’s simply lovely,’ the girl went on, ‘and her frocks are too perfect. Oh, look, Mamma, she’s got the Englishman with her! I thought he’d take her to the *matinée* now that Casa Sevilla’s gone away. If I were a man, I know I’d be crazy about her...’

‘Beauty’s only skin-deep,’ remarked Mamma lugubriously. She spoke with conviction, as well she might; for she was not only fat, but also plain, with a face the colour of a brown boot that has been accidentally blacked over, and an undeniable moustache.

‘I think those dark eyes of hers are *most* fascinating,’ said the daughter. ‘And I adore the way she smiles into his face.’ She sighed. ‘It must be wonderful to have every man you meet madly in love with you. First it was that attractive Frenchman from the Embassy in Madrid; then that Polish Count; then Casa Sevilla; and now this Mr. Garrett’ — she sighed again — ‘the only decent-looking man in the hotel!’

Her mother sniffed ominously. ‘It is unbecoming in a *jeune fille* to envy a person like that. Men are too easily dazzled. The Old World is upside down since the war. The *cocottes* act the *grande dame* and the young girls behave like *cocottes*. Pleasure centres like San Sebastian are no place for a Child of Mary, *ma chérie*. We should have gone to Lourdes, as I wanted. We should have gone, if you hadn’t got round Papa...’

Her *chérie* made a little face. ‘Mamma, Mamma,’ she exclaimed excitedly, disregarding these pious re-

grets, 'she's making him unbutton her glove. I wonder what she uses to keep her skin so white. Oh, look at the way he rests his hands on her arm...'

Her mother hauled her immense bulk from her chair, a slow and methodical operation, as it were by stages, like an elephant rising to its feet.

'Come, chérie,' she said with dignity, 'it's time we went upstairs.'

Her daughter seemed reluctant to go. She followed her mother very slowly past the table where Doña Inocencia and her companion were having tea.

'Oh, what a stupid afternoon!' the woman was saying. 'These charity performances are all the same. An orgy of determined amateurs and bored professionals! What did you think of the dancer? She's considered a beauty...'

'Her eyes are too small,' the man answered. 'Latin beauty derives from the eyes...'

And he looked into hers, limpid and large and liquid, changing to as many moods as she, a woman, could boast.

'Like yours,' he added.

She smiled and glanced at her reflection in a panel of looking-glass set in the door behind him.

'My eyes are my best feature,' she remarked composedly. 'The Saracens made most Spanish noses too large, and as for my chin'—her finger slid down the firm outline and stopped at the dimple which, light as a shadow, cleft the point—'it's mulish!'

He laughed easily. 'I expect you're pretty obstinate. And hot-tempered, too. I'd like to see you in a rage, Doña Inocencia!'

Her eyes flashed from her reflection in the mirror to

his face. Their dark effulgence stressed the creamy pallor of her skin, the incomparable pallor of Spanish beauty, softer than moonlight, lucent like the pearl, white with the milky whiteness of the petals of the edelweiss. She teased out one of the two flat curls, blue-black and glossy, that were all her small hat showed of her short hair.

‘Why?’

‘Because you’re handsome at all times, but when you’re excited about anything, you’re sheerly lovely!’

They had been speaking French, but now she clapped her hands delightedly and cried in her clipped English:

‘Oh, Mr. Garrett, a compliment! And I who thought you so different from the rest...’

Reproachfully he shook his head at her.

‘You’ll never let me forget my stupidity...’

‘Perhaps I like to remember it. What’s to-day? July the fourth, isn’t it? That’s to say for five weeks you and I have been living in this hotel. Of these five weeks, three you spent in staring at me, with big eyes... thus! And did I venture to glance back at you ever so modestly, pouf! you dropped your eyes to the ground... so!’ For an instant she let her long, dark lashes sweep her cheek, then glanced up teasingly. And when young Casa Sevilla offers you the chance of being presented,’ she went on, ‘eh bien! you repel him! You see, amigo mio, my information is excellent...’

‘Spare me...’ he supplicated.

‘No quarter,’ she rattled on gaily. ‘In defence of my sex I’ll make you drain the cup to the dregs! In the end what remained for a poor woman to do, tortured for three weeks by dumbly appealing glances, but to speak up herself to find out whether the stranger is dumb,

bashful...’ she paused and, with a touch of archness, added: ‘...or merely indifferent!’

‘Now I must protest,’ he cried. ‘I spoke to you first!’

‘Dios,’ she ejaculated, ‘is history thus to be falsified? I borrowed your *Matin*, out on the terrace there, a newspaper I’d already read, which you were quite obviously finished with! And, oh, miracle! at last the ice was broken. You must have cold hearts in your country, Señor Inglez, if it takes three weeks of our Basque sunshine, and’ — she smiled mischievously — ‘other warming rays to thaw yours!’

Now he was silent, thoughtfully considering the brilliant animation of her face.

‘But I’ve not lost hope,’ she resumed demurely. ‘You’re improving, sir! You’ve paid me a compliment!’

‘It wasn’t a compliment,’ he averred stoutly. ‘A compliment is a pleasing untruth. But this is not an untruth. You *are* very beautiful, Doña Inocencia!’

For the briefest of instants her fingers brushed his hand.

‘The way you said that was worth a hundred compliments,’ she said softly.

‘I never pay compliments,’ he observed.

Her eyes mocked him again.

‘And never, never run after silly women who are dying to know you, either, I suppose?’

Her raillery made him flush. ‘You know you’re talking rubbish. I was dead keen on meeting you. But I didn’t want you to turn me down. And I couldn’t trouble to be civil to that Casa Sevilla fellow with his patronising air...’

‘Bah!’ she exclaimed contemptuously. ‘A mass of vanity, like all my countrymen! They think they’ve

only to breathe a word of love into a woman's ear for her to fall straightway into their arms! But you're not like them, my friend! These other poor fools storm me with love à la housarde. But you...' She checked. 'Do you know,' she said presently, 'in the two weeks I've known you to speak to, you've never made me a pretty speech before to-day?'

He coloured up again.

'The more fool I, most people would say!'

Gravely she considered him.

'I wonder! Perhaps you're more subtle than I know...'

'How do you mean?'

Her tone became suddenly solemn.

'Who told you,' she said rather huskily, 'that the surest way to interest me was to force me to take the first step?'

Her change of mind threw him off his guard. He realised too late that their talk had without warning shifted from the plane of badinage to that of sober earnest.

'I'm afraid I never looked at it like that,' he answered simply.

'Do you know a great many women, Mr. Garrett?' Her eyes were laughing at him again.

'I've always preferred quality to quantity,' he gave her back.

She laughed softly: her laugh was low and pleasant, rolling in the throat like the coo of a dove. 'The implication is flattering to me,' she retorted. 'I should have thought you'd have loads of women friends, a man like you, with no profession, travelling about to amuse yourself. You must be difficult to please.'

She glanced at her watch and broke off with an exclamation.

‘Dios!’ she cried in a panic, and began to gather up her impedimenta, her gloves, her fan, her bag. ‘Do you know that it’s after eight and I have to dine at ten!’ She smoothed down her short skirt over the gauziest of flesh-coloured stockings and stood up.

‘What is it to-night?’ he asked. ‘The American Ambassador’s dinner for Independence Day?’

She gave her small head a quick shake.

‘I’m dining out...with a man!’ she announced provocatively.

Her companion did not react to her challenge.

‘Then I shan’t see you again this evening?’ was his quiet rejoinder.

‘Probably not. We’re dining at the Casino.’

He extended his hand. ‘Au revoir, then. And thank you for this afternoon!’

‘Au revoir, Mr. Garrett!’ She paused. ‘But I can’t go on calling you Mr. Garrett...’

‘Why not Rex?’ he suggested.

She repeated the name over once or twice as though she were tasting its flavour. ‘Too harsh!’ she announced. ‘Haven’t you got a pet name?’

‘Everybody calls me Rex,’ he replied.

‘Then that settles it,’ she declared. ‘I never follow the rest of the world. I knew a man once who had nice thick hair as you have. We used to call him Riccy. I think I shall call you Riccy. Do you mind?’

‘Not when you say it as charmingly as that!’

She laughed her little gurgling laugh.

‘You’re making up for lost time, I see. I believe I’ll have to forgive you for those wasted three weeks!’

‘The prisoner makes no defence,’ he rejoined, ‘and throws himself on the mercy of the court!’

‘Then come to the terrace at a quarter to ten! You shall give me a cocktail before dinner and I will pass sentence! A toute à l’heure . . . Riccy!’

He raised her hand to his lips in the Spanish manner. Tenderly, as he stooped, her eyes rested on his dark hair. Then he strode away and she went to the lift. As she rang the bell, she turned to watch the slim, athletic figure pass out into the sunset. A far-away look was on her face and so absorbed was she in thought that the lift-boy had to ask her twice whether she were going up.

CHAPTER XI

DON LEANDRO MAKES HIS BOW

THE dinner-hour at San Sebastian is anywhere from ten o'clock until midnight. One of the unexplained mysteries of the age is when the smart set of Spain find leisure to sleep. At San Sebastian, the Court's summer residence, people lunch at tea-time, go to thés dansants at the dinner hour, dine at ten or thereabouts, and gamble or dance at the Casino or private houses until the small hours. Yet early in the morning the spacious streets reverberate to the open cut-outs of Hispanos taking the young people, men and girls alike — and some of the old ones too — to tennis or to golf.

The lounge of the hotel was deserted when Rex Garrett came up from the grill, where he had eaten his solitary dinner. It was half-past nine. The terrace, too, was empty save for a waiter ruminating amid a wilderness of chairs and tables. Rex sent the man to fetch a couple of the Bronxes that Doña Inocencia liked.

Dusk had fallen and the sunset glow was fading from the sky. All round the sweep of the bay points of radiance were leaping into life. On the purple mountain planted on the tip of the promontory which the city thrusts into the bay the light-house was sending forth its flashes. Far over to the left a cluster of lights that seemed to hover in the upper reaches of the air marked the restaurant perched on the dizzy summit of Monte Igueldo. Below the terrace there was the murmur of laughing voices and the patter of Basque sandals under the tamarisks of the esplanade and, in constant accompaniment, the restless surge of the Atlantic rollers on the

shore. From time to time the thrumming of a guitar mounted romantically out of the blue-black shades of night.

With listless steps Rex walked to the columned balustrade, and, leaning his elbows on the parapet, gazed to seaward. The livid rays of an arc lamp on the promenade below showed his features haggard, his eyes weary and mournful. Now that he was alone he seemed to have lost his buoyancy. Every line of his attitude, as he stood there in the gathering darkness, bespoke the most profound dejection.

A light step on the tiles behind him, a faint scent of wood violets, warm and subtly enveloping, an intimate, secret fragrance to stir the senses, the gossamer feel of cool, satin-smooth skin for a moment on his cheek, and Doña Inocencia was at his side.

‘Santisima!’ she exclaimed, her face almost touching his, ‘you look as though you’d seen a ghost! For the love of God, my friend, what ails you?’

But her question rang falteringly, so rapid was the change that came over the gloomy, brooding features. On the instant, he had himself in hand and she found herself gazing at the debonair front which had always baffled her, at the laughing raillery of the eyes she found so disconcerting.

‘I was beginning to think,’ he said easily, ‘that you’d forgotten our appointment. Can you wonder that I looked despairing?’

Her eyes glinted through their heavy fringes and she shook her head.

‘Another woman might believe that,’ she replied sombrely. ‘But not I. I, too, have my moments of bitter depression when I seem to see the whole of my life,

past, present, and future, spread out before me as black . . .’ — she stretched forth a pointing hand — ‘as black as the sea yonder . . .’

She broke off musing.

‘Bah!’ she said suddenly. ‘You give me the blues and I want to be sparkling to-night.’ She swung round to where, on a wicker table, the cocktails stood frosting their glasses. She handed him his drink. ‘Away with melancholy!’ she cried, raising her glass. She sipped delicately, as a woman drinks a cocktail, and set the glass down on the parapet. Then she stepped back. ‘How do you like my frock?’ she demanded.

She was wearing a Manila shawl, yellowed with the years, boldly flowered. Her bare shoulders gleamed as she whisked it from her and showed a clinging robe patterned in sequins, blue and green, of a dull gold ground. Her hair, black and straight and glossy, cropped close to her small, round head, and brushed sideways across the nape of her dead-white neck, was like a black satin cap. About her throat, full and round, she wore a single string, tight-fitting, of large and lustrous pearls. Her golden frock, its sequins flaming like gems in the cold light of the arc, gave her an exotic almost an Asiatic air.

‘It’s gorgeous,’ said Rex.

She pouted. ‘Only that?’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘I’m sorry. Modern fashions leave me cold. Beauty such as yours has no need of tinsel!’

‘Tinsel!’ she ejaculated. ‘Oh, my poor frock! And I thought I looked so fetching.’ She darted him a glance out of the corners of her eyes. ‘Do you always say exactly what you think?’ she asked.

‘I try to!’

She moved slowly towards him, her fingers toying with her pearls.

‘You interest me,’ she remarked meditatively. ‘Any other man would have raved about my frock, if only to give me pleasure. But you’re right. Simple things suit me best. I put this gown on to-night because the man who’s taking me out to dinner likes me to look gorgeous.’ She flashed him a mischievous glance. ‘Such a wonderful man! I’m crazy about him. Don’t you want to know who he is?’

‘No,’ said Rex.

His bluntness did not appear to affront her. She cooed a little laugh.

‘Ah,’ she retorted in her soft contralto, ‘now you’ve given yourself away! If you hadn’t really cared, you’d have asked me.’ She laid a hand, with wrist braceleted in diamonds, bangle to bangle like a fetter, on his sleeve. ‘Tell me, Riccy, have you ever been in love?’

Her warm fragrance was like a cloud about his senses. Below the terrace, under the trees, the guitar was ringing to a strain of plaintive melody. Almost under her breath, in her low and thrilling voice, a little husky but sweet and true, she sang to the slow throb of the strings:

*Asomate á la ventana,
Ay, ay, ay,
Paloma del alma mia!*

She broke off suddenly. ‘Have you?’ she said again.

‘Why do you ask me that?’ he demanded.

‘Because...’ she checked. ‘Oh, I don’t know. I can’t picture you lifted out of yourself, that’s all. When we’re together I always feel that you’re holding up a

mask before your face, like that American dancer we saw at the Casino the other night. And yet you're full of temperament...' She leaned towards him, her eyes, only half serious, gazing up into his features, which had suddenly assumed a stony, bleak look. 'Do you think you could fall in love with me?'

He seemed to stir himself from a day-dream. His sternness passed.

'Not as you understand love,' he answered. 'If I fell in love with you, I should want you all, all for me, with no secrets between us...'

She drew back quickly. He caught the look of suspicion that suddenly troubled her eyes.

'Secrets?' she repeated with a sort of reluctant emphasis. 'Why do you say that?'

His look reassured her.

'Well,' he remarked nonchalantly, 'you have a secret to-night, haven't you? Your tête-à-tête dinner with this man you're so crazy about...'

She took his face in her two hands as one might do with a child. 'Oh,' she exclaimed with a little croon of sympathy, 'it's a shame to tease him! I was only joking, Riccy. Did you really think there was anybody else?'

'Well,' he said, 'before me there was de Mathis, and after him Casa Sevilla...'

She gave his cheek a little pat and dropped her hands.

'They were nothing to me. I can't help men falling in love with me, can I?'

Her big eyes were reproachful as she raised them to his face. He could feel the thrill of her slim body against his as she stood against him, her lips just

parted, expectant, breathing rather fast. Almost reluctantly his hands moved to her shoulders. Her eyes half closed and slowly her head fell back displaying the full white roundness of her throat.

Then a voice, a hard, metallic voice, behind them said in Spanish: 'Good evening!'

They whipped apart and swung about to find a little old man in a long black cloak confronting them. Reddish lashless eyes mustered them ironically out of a citreous face, bloodless and smooth as an egg. Beneath a curving, high-bridged nose, sharp as a quill, lips thin as razor-blades twitched with the involuntary spasm of old age.

The large Spanish hat, black and broad of brim, which he grasped in his hand, described a gesture of greeting.

'I have been waiting for you in the hall, Inocencia,' the newcomer remarked with a touch of reproach in his grating voice.

He looked from one to the other. In stature he was below medium height, but enveloped with such an air of dignity that he seemed to dominate and fill the dark and silent terrace.

Inocencia gathered her shawl about her.

'It was so hot indoors,' she explained. 'Mr. Garrett was good enough to give me a cocktail whilst I was waiting for you. But I must introduce you. Mr. Garrett... Don Leandro de Ortiz!'

Her eyes, mischief-lit still, glanced from the yellow, vulture-like face to Rex, signalling a mute demand for forgiveness. The two men acknowledged the introduction, Don Leandro with a formal bow, Rex with a brief nod. The younger man felt embarrassed under the other's piercing gaze. Don Leandro's eyes, heavily

bloodshot, were pale blue and cold, like the light in the heart of an iceberg. His glance was full of suspicion. Rex had the feeling that the other resented his presence. With the air of a sovereign dismissing a courtier, Don Leandro turned from the young man to Inocencia.

‘The victoria is waiting,’ he said. ‘Shall we go?’

Clutching her shawl about her, Inocencia gave Rex her hand.

‘Until to-morrow!’ she said and it seemed to him that she let her voice dwell significantly on the phrase. Don Leandro inclined his head formally to Rex and donned his large black hat. Then, with short, precise steps, he followed the woman through the open doors of the terrace into the hotel.

Rex spent the evening in the gaming rooms. It was two o’clock when he reached his bedroom. A note which lay under the door revealed to him the meaning of Doña Inocencia’s parting remark.

‘The sentence of the Court,’ he read in her bold, pointed hand, ‘is that the defendant give the plaintiff lunch at Saint-Jean-de-Luz to-morrow. I will drive you over in my car. Meet me in the hall at ten.’

The note was signed with a tremendous ‘I,’ firm, imperious, challenging.

CHAPTER XII

THE PIGEON HOUSE

UNTIL their talk on the terrace that Sunday night, Rex Garrett's acquaintance with Doña Inocencia had been desultory and almost distant. Her laughing reproof of his slowness was not unjustified. Gingerly and with caution he had set to work upon the desperate, difficult mission he had undertaken. From the moment of his arrival in San Sebastian, on the morning after the execution, he had lost no opportunity of throwing himself in Doña Inocencia's way: not, as she supposed, because he was seeking an introduction, but to acquaint himself with her mode of life, the sort of people she frequented; to study the woman herself.

His patient watchfulness was unrewarded. There was nothing about her life to arouse suspicion, unless it were the fact that she was alone at the hotel without even a maid. For the rest she lived the normal existence of a young and fashionable woman at a summer resort, bathing a little, motoring a little, dancing and flirting a good deal. She appeared to have no relations and no intimate friends; and her acquaintances, who were numerous, were modish and palpably harmless.

Don Leandro, as Rex had cause to remember afterwards, was the first individual in the least degree eccentric he had seen in her company. She seemed to know and be liked by everybody. To the shopkeepers of San Sebastian, Doña Inocencia and her yellow car were as familiar an object as the Rock of Santa Clara. And Biarritz, and Saint-Jean-de-Luz as well, as Rex presently

discovered, was full of smiles for the beautiful Doña Inocencia.

For he had spent the first three weeks of his stay in gleanings, far and wide through the Basque country, such information as he could pick up about this woman marked down as the quarry of a stern and relentless pursuit. His harvest was meagre. Popular and well-known as Doña Inocencia was, nobody could say very much about her origin or history.

There was no word of a father, but her mother, Doña Cristina Santin, had, until her death two years before, passed most of the year with her daughter at Biarritz, making occasional visits to Madrid or Paris. From a croupier at the Biarritz Casino, Rex learned that the old lady had been an inveterate gambler (he had not failed to notice that Inocencia never played). Since the girl was obviously well-off, it was presumed that Doña Cristina had left her in comfortable circumstances. Since her mother's death she had lived in hotels, spending the summer and part of the winter at San Sebastian and travelling the rest of the time. She mentioned one day in Rex's hearing—and he was destined to recall the circumstance—that, during the preceding winter, she had made a tour of French Morocco.

His enquiries brought him no nearer his goal. Remained, as his last source of information, Doña Inocencia herself. Watching her, day after day, in the hall of the Cosmopolite, mettlesome and alluring, always vital, always exquisitely groomed, receiving as her due the rather obvious homage of de Mathis, of Casa Sevilla, of other men in the hotel, Rex divined that, to gain her confidence, he must approach her on the sentimental side. On looking back he realised that, always haunted by

the image of Sally, he had dallied over this barren quest of his simply because he feared to plunge into the amorous adventure in which this line of attack would inevitably involve him.

She was interested in him, he knew. Where women were concerned he had no vanity; but he could see that his studied air of aloofness intrigued her. After their unconventional meeting she had deliberately drawn him into her orbit. Still he stood off. She had her two ardent admirers, de Mathis and Casa Sevilla, and Rex had no intention of allowing her, as he suspected she wished, to play him off against these two who were already at daggers drawn.

Then de Mathis was summoned to Paris, leaving his Spanish rival a clear field. Still Rex kept his distance. He readily joined up with her party on excursions to Biarritz to watch a pelota match, or to Saint-Jean-de-Luz to dance at the Pergola. But he never thrust himself forward, never sought her out, until Casa Sevilla's departure for Madrid, two days before the charity matinée, brought her into the open with the plain suggestion that Rex should take her to the performance.

Of course he offered his services at once. This woman interested him greatly. Nor was he insensible to her charm. Charm, in addition to good looks, she definitely possessed, that magnetic quality which the fairy god-mother lays in the cradles of a few fortunate mortals, and Inocencia wielded it unconsciously.

Rex was aware of this magnetism of hers and resisted it. Perhaps from an instinct of self-preservation, because, alive to her dangerous beauty, he realised that he would require ruthless resolution and unclouded judgment to carry through his undertaking to the end; per-

haps because, in all her humours, he was always conscious of a rigid self-control which, like a steel curtain, lay behind them.

She was a baffling person, he reflected as, on the morning after their tête-à-tête, he waited for her in the lounge. Every time he tried to catch a glimpse of the real woman, he found himself confronted by this iron screen. Only once had she seemed about to lift it and that was on the previous evening when her unpleasant-looking friend, Don Leandro, or whatever his name was, had interrupted them.

Out of how many contrasting moods was her temperament welded! By turns, as he studied her, he had seen her demure or flirtatious, grave or frivolous, provocative or sympathetic. But the Inocencia who, on the stroke of ten, came quickly through the revolving door was none of these things.

Prettier than ever she was in a plain drab tailor-made, so severely fashioned as to suggest a uniform, under a soft leather motoring-coat. Her natty leather driving-cap, fur-lined and close-fitting, with its ear-pieces jauntily cocked up, gave her a wingèd appearance, like Mercury. But her face was hard, her manner austere, and her greeting brusque.

Rex was puzzled. She was Spanish, and few Spaniards have any sense of time. If time was made for slaves and not for Christians, the Most Christian Kingdom fully merits its title. And on previous occasions Inocencia had been invariably late; on their motoring excursions she was always the last of the women to appear. For this trip of theirs to Saint-Jean-de-Luz, Rex had pictured her descending from her room, half an hour, an hour, behind the time, rather fluffy and sum-

mery, wearing the unrepentant smile of the pretty woman who believes that chic, rather than punctuality, is the politeness of her sex.

But here she was, exact to the minute, garbed like a racing motorist, business-like, abrupt.

‘You won’t mind if I abandon you for an hour before lunch, will you?’ she said. ‘I have a call to pay at Saint-Jean-de-Luz. I’ll drop you at the Pergola and come back later.’ Without awaiting his reply, she added, ‘You’ve got your passport? You’ll want it at the frontier going into France. Good. If you’re ready, we’ll make a start.’

Her yellow car, a racing roadster, with a stream line, was at the door. It was a day of brilliant sunshine with a warm and boisterous wind that whipped the bright blue sea into creaming breakers and whirled up clouds of dust from the broad flagged streets. Inocencia drove in silence through the city with a sure touch that guided them deftly in and out of the clanging trams and the crawling ox-carts. Once they were clear of the town, her small foot pressed down the accelerator and her gloved hand advanced the sparking regulator on the steering-wheel. The speedometer needle crept to eighty kilometres, fifty miles an hour, and stayed there.

‘It’s twenty miles to Saint-Jean,’ she remarked. ‘We ought to do it in forty minutes if the road’s not too crowded...’

‘And if we’re not held up at the frontier,’ Rex put in. ‘They kept me waiting nearly half an hour last time I went across.’

She flicked him a sideways glance. ‘They’re all friends of mine on both sides of the border,’ she retorted rather haughtily. She slowed down at a cross-roads

and sounded an impatient double hoot on the Klaxon. 'I'm horrid to-day,' she announced, as the car gathered speed again. 'You're not going to like me one little bit, Riccy.'

He laughed. 'Worried?'

She nodded sombrely. 'And these Basques infuriate me. They're stupid...and so lazy. The garage promised that the car would be ready at eight. It wasn't finished at nine...'

'Do you mean to tell me you were up at eight?' Rex demanded.

'I had my coffee at seven,' she replied, 'I can be very energetic when I like...'

'Anyhow, the car's running like a clock now,' he rejoined.

She gave a curt nod. 'It was only the accumulators,' she said, and relapsed into silence.

Her claim to have friends at the frontier proved to be no idle boast. The plump Spaniard, blazing with gold lace, who kissed her hand and, after a perfunctory glance at Rex's passport, waved them on their way, was no less affable than his French colleague on the other side of the line.

'Beautiful weather for a promenade, Doña Inocencia,' cried the Frenchman, while in the background a semi-circle of customs men smiled their broadest. 'You'll be back before midnight, or do you want a special permit?'

The girl thanked him with a smile. They would be returning before dark, she told him. So saying, she pressed the self-starter. But, instead of the joyous rumble of the engine, only a feeble wheeze gave answer. Again the girl put her foot on the button. The cog-wheels whirred, but the engine refused to start.

Inocencia turned and gave Rex a helpless look.

'These Basque mechanics,' she muttered. 'I might have known they'd have scamped their job!' She hoisted herself out of the driving-seat and jumped lightly to the ground. Rex followed suit.

'Let's have a look at the battery,' he said. He glanced rapidly over the car. 'It's under the floor, isn't it?' And he began to roll back the rubber matting. Inocencia caught his arm with such vehemence that he turned and stared at her in astonishment.

'We can't wait for that,' she explained impatiently. 'There's a starting-handle in the back...' She stepped on the running-board and fished up a crank from the tonneau.

'Let me give her a turn,' Rex proposed.

'It's all right,' she answered, stooping at the bonnet. The engine turned over with a sucking noise; and then the accident happened. The handle flew up violently and the girl sprang back, claspings her thumb.

'Oh, the brute!' she exclaimed. 'It's never done that before.' She was rubbing her thumb, her eyes woe-begone and troubled, like a frightened child's.

'You've not broken it?' asked Rex anxiously, springing forward, while the French officer and the Customs men crowded round solicitously.

'It's only sprained, I think,' she answered.

Rex produced a clean handkerchief, water was brought from the toll-house and the hand was bandaged up. The French officer suggested calling on a doctor; but Inocencia would not hear of it.

'At any rate, you'd better let me drive,' Rex proposed. She was already back at the wheel.

'Oh, no,' she said, 'I can manage!'

He swung the crank and the engine started; but when she sought to release the hand-brake, which was on the right-hand side, she uttered a little cry of pain.

‘How idiotic!’ The smooth white forehead was puckered up and her black eyes glowered with anger. ‘You’ll have to drive, after all,’ she announced, and left the driving-seat free for him. He took the wheel, tested the levers, and they started off.

She was preoccupied and silent. Once or twice Rex, busy with the driving, had the sensation that she was looking at him stealthily. She seemed to be turning something over in her mind. At last she said:

‘You won’t mind waiting for me while I run in and pay a call before lunch?’

He caught a certain note of restraint in her question.

‘Of course not,’ he replied readily. ‘Where are your friends stopping in Saint-Jean-de-Luz, in an hotel or a villa?’

His eyes were on the road, but, without looking at her, he was conscious of a momentary hesitation in her answer.

‘As a matter of fact,’ she rejoined rather glibly, ‘it’s not actually in Saint-Jean-de-Luz at all. It’s a house on the cliffs near Socoa, beyond the fort, on the way to Hendaye. An old servant of my family’s keeps the place as a sort of small pension, not very successfully, I’m afraid, poor old Catarina! I like to see her, if I have the time, when I go to Saint-Jean-de-Luz. Usotegia — that’s the name of the place; it means “The Pigeon House” in Basque — is a primitive kind of establishment: and I fear the road’s not up to much. But it’s passable in this weather.’

‘You’ll have to show me how to get there,’ said Rex.

‘I’ll tell you when to turn off,’ she promised.

Rex said no more. In itself her statement sounded perfectly plausible, yet he had the very definite sensation that she was not speaking the truth. Her punctuality at the start, her business-like air, her strange impatience at the mere idea of any delay at the frontier, all these indications, taken together, pointed to a rendezvous more definite and more important than a casual visit of mercy. Whatever the appointment was, she had clearly intended to go to it alone: it was only her mishap which had compelled her to take him with her.

Through the glittering morning they trundled, in and out of the verdant Basque valleys, where comfortable farms, timber-fronted and wide of eaves, nestled under the shoulders of the fern-clad hills. They were mounting the slope of a pleasantly shaded road, and the tang of the ocean breeze was already in their nostrils, when Inocencia touched her companion’s arm.

‘We turn off here,’ she said.

They took a track that clambered over the spur of a hill all shaggy with bracken, and presently came in sight of the ugly standards of the tramway which runs along the coast from Saint-Jean-de-Luz to Hendaye. The track brought them out upon the cliff-top, a barren waste of coarse grass beaten almost flat by the perpetual wind, in dreary contrast with the laughing green landscape they had quitted. To the right, across a wilderness of bleached grasses darkened by clumps of gorse, the round Moorish castle of Vauban’s old fortress, girt about with a low wall that seemed to spring from the very rock, stood up out of the sea against the white curve of the bay: to their left a distant promontory of the Spanish coast loomed out of a haze that was like

blue smoke; and in front of them, deep green and limitless, the Atlantic sparkled to the low skyline.

The silence was profound, and sometimes, above the quiet mutter of the engine, they heard the gusty wind go hissing through the high grass. From the base of the cliffs, sloping from grassy lip to sea-bed in reddish, razor-edge slivers of rock, mounted the sullen boom of the ocean. No houses, no trees; no sound but the voice of wind and waves. The brutal nakedness of the tramway, this welter of concrete and cast iron and bright steel rails, driven ruthlessly through the solitude, seemed to emphasise the utter desolation of the scene.

The track crossed the tram-lines at a rudimentary station, a 'Halte' consisting merely of a wooden canopy sheltering a bench, and thereafter seemed to wind its way to the cliff edge. Rex took the car gingerly over the deep ruts. Two hundred yards from the tram-lines they topped a rise and at once a long, low roof, red-tiled, rose up from behind a high stone wall. On either side the cliff sloped down to the sea.

The road came to an abrupt end in front of a pair of weather-beaten timber gates set in the wall of the enclosure.

'Here we are!' said Inocencia.

Rex brought the car to a standstill and cut off the motor. At once the deathlike stillness of the place struck upon their ears. There was something stealthy about the hush, like the quiet of a graveyard.

'Wait here,' the girl bade her companion, springing to the ground. 'I'm going to see if anybody's at home...'

She advanced to the gates and then Rex remarked that in one side a wicket, with a latchstring hanging down

through a hole, was cut. Inocencia pulled the string and the door swung inwards. He had a glimpse of a sort of gravelled garden all dappled with sunlight shining through leaves. Then the little door slammed and Rex was left alone.

He descended from the car and lit a cigarette. A series of hollow bumps and crashes, mingled with the rising whine of an electric motor, drew his attention to the land side. In the distance a tram, which seemed to ride over the top of the long grass, went rocking by from the direction of Saint-Jean-de-Luz. It brought a touch of life into the mournful landscape and, hideously inappropriate though the monster was in that setting, Rex felt quite cheered to see it. But in a minute the tram had sped on its way, the noise died down, and, like a drop-curtain, silence descended once more.

Rex looked back at the gates. 'Ye Gods,' was his unspoken comment, 'what a cheerful pitch for a boarding-house! No wonder it doesn't pay!'

There was the clank of an iron bar and the timber gates, shuddering violently, were flung back. A dour-looking Basque peered out suspiciously. He was wearing the usual peasant dress, round blue cap, spotless white shirt without a collar, broad waistband of scarlet, and rope-soled sandals on his bare feet.

'You are to bring the car in,' he told Rex.

Within the gates, across a yard all thatched with leafy vines, a crazy old Basque house squatted. From sheer old age it seemed to have sunk into itself as though it would never raise its head again. As in a Swiss chalet, a low, sloping roof of red tiles projected a yard or more beyond the façade, which was streaked, in the Basque fashion, with heavy timber beams, stained a rich

madder brown. The paint, which had probably once been red, had faded to this neutral shade, and, between the timbers, the plastered front, of a pinkish hue, was stained with damp and flaking.

The entrance was like the entrance to a barn, under a heavy wooden lintel, with a door vaguely discernible beneath the black opening, which ran the whole length of the house. The windows were diamond-paned and sagging in their frames, and those on the second, which was the topmost, storey gave on a rickety balcony, which was painted a discoloured green.

Above the lintel a smooth white stone was let into the façade. It displayed a bird with a straw in its mouth, rudely cut. Rex, recalling Inocencia's translation, decided that the figure must be meant to represent a pigeon. A date was carved below: 1710.

Facing Rex, as he drove the car slowly in, another pair of gates, painted green, broke the line of a wall which made the fourth side of an oblong composed of the side of the house and the rear and right-hand walls of the enclosure. These gates stood wide.

'Straight in,' said the Basque, beckoning.

Rex obeyed and found himself in an inner court with a floor of pounded dirt and, at the far end, a lofty wall with side wings.

He did not need to see the curious, rounded pattern, like the scaling of a fish, which stencilled, from pinnacle to base, the lichen-grey surface of the high blank wall, to recognise at a glance a fronton, or handball court, with the playing wall all scored with the marks of the ball. Every Basque village has its fronton, as indispensable and as inevitable, in this home of ball games,

as the church which it usually neighbours; and to many a tavern as well a ballcourt is attached.

Clearly the court had not been played on for many years. The floor sprouted grass in different places and its surface was moss-grown and ravaged by the rains. Part of the coping of the wall had fallen and lay in fragments on the ground. An old-fashioned chaise, eaten up with rust and mouldering to decay, a broken iron bedstead and other sad wreckage, stacked along one side, showed to what base uses the old court was now put.

The Basque had a hushed air about him, like a muted violin. His sandalled feet were noiseless on the firm floor. He signed to Rex to halt the car in the middle of the court.

Rex switched off the motor and the mournful silence of the place seemed to drape itself about him in stifling folds. When he descended to the ground, he was startled to find a second man at his elbow. By his appearance he was a Spaniard, whose fat and oily face from cheek-bone to jaw was peppered with a black stubble. He was in his shirt-sleeves, and, like the other, wore sandals which gave him, too, a silent gait.

He mustered Rex with a long and hostile stare. Then the first man came forward. 'Follow me!' he said to Rex.

Padding on his noiseless feet, the Basque led the way back into the yard. Hardly was Rex clear of the fronton than the green gates fell to behind him with a crash. The guide went in under the lintel of the house and opened the big nail-studded front door.

Before the house, under the leafy canopy, a few rusty iron tables and chairs stood about.

'I may as well wait for Madame out here,' Rex suggested. 'It's pleasant in the shade...'

'Madame said you were to wait in the house,' was the stolid rejoinder. The man stepped back to let the other pass, the door slammed, and Rex was left alone.

The front door opened directly upon a spacious room with low-pitched ceiling, supported on tremendous beams, and earthen floor. Before the wide open hearth with its brass fire-dogs a tall settle stood, of solid oak darkened, like the rest of the furniture, by the years; the dresser with its array of pewter, the long marriage chest against the wall, the solemn grandfather clock in the corner. Every object was familiar to Rex, for in surroundings such as these his boyhood had been spent. This was the first time since, nearly twenty years ago, he had crossed the threshold of a Basque kitchen, and he saw himself again as a little barelegged child in the old homestead of the valley of the Nive.

The kitchen, as is usual in the older type of Basque houses, seemed to be used as the living-room. At any rate, the hearth was cold and a table, spread with a very dirty cloth, was set for two. Some wine stood on the dresser and a newspaper lay on a chair.

Two doors, one on either side, opened off the kitchen. Rex had a glimpse of a couple of little bedrooms, sordid and poky, where coarse brown rugs trailed on sheetless truckle beds. These, he surmised, were the sleeping quarters of the two men he had seen outside, for whom, also, presumably, the table was laid.

From the far end of the kitchen a staircase with a handsome carved post and twisted rails ascended, curving, to the upper floors. Rex went up a few steps and listened. All was quiet as the grave. Business did

not seem to be exactly brisk at the boarding-house...

He wondered what had become of Inocencia. She had been away for fully half an hour. He felt sorely tempted to explore the upper rooms and find out what sort of a pension this was, where the only guests appeared to be a loutish Basque peasant and a dubious-looking Spaniard. But would he have time to risk it before Inocencia reappeared?

He walked across to the iron door, intending to reconnoitre the garden.

The front door had no handle on the inside. When he pushed the door, it resisted.

He was locked in.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MYSTERY OF THE FRONTON

THERE was no doubt about it. The door was securely fastened — on the outside. His first sensation was not of wonderment, but of relief. Here at least, after the galling inactivity of the past weeks, was a definite act, a ray of light, as it were, piercing the mists in which he had been blindly groping.

The situation was clear enough. Inocencia had meant to pay this visit alone and, since circumstances had obliged her to take him along, he was to be kept out of the way until the interview, with whomever it might be, was at an end.

But why had they shut him up inside the house? He had the run of the whole place. The staircase was there, inviting him to roam the upper floors. They had locked him in because, obviously, the secret, whatever it was, was not in the house, because this mysterious business of Inocencia's was outside. That, then, was why he had not been permitted to wait in the garden.

At the end of the room, alongside the oaken dresser which was ranged along the back wall, was a small door. Rex had already remarked it. On approaching it now he was not surprised to find that it was locked. His eye at the keyhole discovered a patch of peerless blue framed in the Moorish arch of the opening. The door, then, gave on the open air, and the kitchen, as is usual in old Basque houses, occupied the whole of the ground floor. The back of the house must be near the edge

of the cliff: probably the little door led out on the terrace or something of the kind. Anyhow, there was no exit that way. The lock was old-fashioned, enormous, with a massive bolt.

However, for the moment he had no desire to escape. What he wished to do was to reconnoitre. The kitchen was lit, indifferently enough, by three windows. Two, heavily barred, flanked the entrance door on either side under the lintel. The third, long and shallow, was set high up in the kitchen wall, on the right-hand as one came in.

He opened one of the windows beside the front door. The bars were close and strong. The yard outside was deserted. But from somewhere close at hand came the sound of sundry bumps and scrapings as though luggage were being unloaded.

He suddenly remembered the handball court. The right-hand wall of the kitchen, as he stood with his back to the front door, formed the left side of the handball court where he had left the car. He laid his ear to the wall.

Yes, boxes, or something similar, were being dragged along the ground outside. He began to consider this matter of the car. If Inocencia's business were so secret that she had to lock him up, to keep it from his knowledge, surely it would have been simpler for her to have left the car at Saint-Jean-de-Luz and driven out to Usotegia in a taxi.

But she had come in the roadster. It certainly looked as though the secret, whatever it was, were in some way connected with the car. He felt his pulses quicken. That might explain why he had been requested to drive the car into the handball court, instead of leaving it in

the yard before the house where there was plenty of room, and why the Spaniard had shut the gates of the fronton as soon as Rex had passed out.

He set his ear to the wall again. Now he thought he could make out the low murmur of voices. He stepped back into the room. He must look into this. But how? Should he take a chance and make a bolt upstairs to find a window overlooking the fronton? The risk was too great thus early in the game, when success was wholly dependent on his arousing no suspicion. Besides...

The thought had scarcely come to him before he had dragged a high stool to the marriage chest which stood against the right-hand wall, placed it upon it and mounted thereon. His head was now on a level with the top of the shallow window pierced high up in the wall, in order, doubtless, to supplement the meagre light afforded by the windows under the lintel. It was hardly more than a fanlight, swinging inward in two pieces like a casement. Its bolt was red with rust and its panes were coated with grime. The screen of wire netting, stretched across the outside to protect the window from the ball, confirmed his surmise that the trap overlooked the fronton.

To open the casement he did not venture, but he scrubbed the glass clean with his handkerchief. The window was deep enough to command a slanting view of the lower end of the court. He found himself gazing down upon the high wooden gates and, just inside them, as he had left it, the car. The two men he had seen before were stooping down over the body, one at either door. The floor matting and the cushions of the seat lay on the ground.

His brain seemed to go numb with disappointment. This was a fine mare's nest he had discovered! Of course, they were repairing the self-starter. He was about to spring down in disgust from his observation post, when Inocencia suddenly appeared in his field of vision. At the same moment the Spaniard, whose broad beam was turned towards the window, straightened himself up, and Rex saw that he was lifting a long flat box out of the car. Simultaneously, on the other side, the Basque brought forth a similar case. While Rex, swaying on his stool, watched eagerly, they bent down again, each on his side, and between them produced four more boxes.

Contraband!

The realisation of his discovery sent an icy chill rippling up and down his spine. In a flash the scene at the frontier was before his eyes. No wonder she had prevented him from exposing, under the very eyes of the French customs, the double bottom, or whatever device was fitted to the car, for concealing her smuggled wares. It must have been an anguishing moment for her, yet she had never turned a hair. This woman must have nerves of steel...

Now, with a commanding gesture, she was pointing up the court. The two men began dragging the boxes stacked together in the direction of the back wall, which Rex could not see, and passed out of sight. The cases, which were of common deal, were carefully nailed down and were not unlike those in which pictures are packed. They were clearly of no particular weight, for the men had no apparent difficulty in shifting them.

And then Don Leandro stepped into the picture...

With his tiny precise steps, each foot set down de-

liberately like a tango dancer's, he minced into the watcher's field of view. The small bald head, polished and brown, like a ball of old ivory, was thrust forward from under the blanket which, despite the hot sunshine, he wore about his shoulders. With his neck, sagging in yellow folds, craned out from under the high ridge of his wrap and his deliberate, measured gait, he might have been an old tortoise taking the air.

He and Doña Inocencia were speaking together. Rex could not hear what they were saying, but the old man seemed to be urging something upon the girl, who was giving him back brief replies with a nonchalant air. Don Leandro was gesticulating with animation, with one hand only, as is the Spanish way, now pointing up the court, now shaking his hand in front of Inocencia, fingers turned upwards and held closed together, as though in warning, now indicating, with a wide gesture of the arm, the house behind. His manner was extremely deferential and every time the girl's lips moved he broke off his harangue to listen.

Rex had an odd feeling that they were talking about him. He had no reasonable grounds for supposing anything of the kind, but the presentiment came upon him so strongly that he drew back suddenly from the window. When he looked out again, Inocencia had disappeared and Don Leandro was picking his way delicately in the direction of the back wall. The gates of the fronton stood open and, at the same moment, Rex heard footsteps crunch the gravel in the yard outside.

In a panic he sprang down from his perch, restored the stool to its place and, snatching up the newspaper, sank down into a chair just as the front door swung back. A little old woman in rusty black, with her

sparse grey hair covered by a black net, stood on the threshold. Behind her was Inocencia.

'Oh, Riccy,' she cried, 'you must have thought I was never coming. But I've been talking about old times with Catarina whilst she was rubbing my hand with one of her Basque liniments. But you don't know Catarina, do you? She's my old nurse. Catarina, this is my friend, Señor Garrett...'

The old woman bobbed, champing her toothless jaws and rubbing her hands up and down her blue print apron. She muttered something with a senile smile.

'She's saying "good-morning" to you in Basque,' Inocencia explained. Then to the old woman she said: 'What's come over you, Catarina? Speak to him in French! He knows French as well as you or I do!'

Catarina fixed her sharp little eyes on the young man's face.

'Not a Basque, then?' she remarked in her patois French.

'How stupid you are this morning!' Inocencia broke in. 'Of course he's not a Basque. He's an Englishman!'

The old woman wagged her head.

'He ought to be one of us with a face like that,' she mumbled. 'One would say a Basque to look at him. Jean made the remark to me only just now.' And she blinked her little lizard eyes at the dour-looking Basque who had just appeared behind her.

'Tiens,' Inocencia murmured, her large eyes on the young man's face, 'I've never noticed it before. You've got something of a Basque look about you, Riccy. You didn't have a Basque ancestor by any chance?'

Rex laughed. 'Not that I know of. But you might

put it the other way round and claim that there are plenty of Basques round here who look like Englishmen. Wellington's army spent a winter in these parts, you know!

Old Catarina wheezed merrily, flashing her toothless gums. 'Ben sôr,' she cackled. 'They didn't waste their time in the long winter evenings, the sacré red-coats, allez!' And she wheezed again.

'If you start Catarina on her reminiscences, we shall never get any lunch at all,' declared the girl. 'Come on, Riccy, you must be starving! Au revoir, Catarina!'

She slipped her hand into the young man's arm and drew him along the front of the house to where the gates of the ballcourt stood open.

Throughout their conversation, Rex, standing in the recess under the lintel outside the front door, had kept his eye on the gates. He was wondering what had become of Don Leandro. The old man must still be on the court. If he had crossed the garden to leave the enclosure by the main entrance, Rex must have seen him, for the young man had been at the front door almost as soon as Catarina had opened it.

But when they reached the fronton they found it deserted. It was exactly as Rex had first seen it, flooded with the vivid sunlight which struck specks, blazing like brilliants, from the quartz of the sandy floor. The high wind whisked up the dust and brought, with a melancholy rustle, a little spout of cement and rubble rattling down from the crumbling coping of the back wall.

The yellow car stood there, as Rex had left it, with cushions and matting in place: the broken carriage, the rusty bed, and the rest of the rubbish still mouldered

where they lay. But of Don Leandro and the boxes there was no sign.

Rex flashed a quick glance about him as, with the starting-handle which Inocencia handed him, he prepared to crank up the engine. Except by the gates, there was no visible means of egress from the fronton. The shallow window from which he had kept watch was the only break in the blank monotony of the side wall of the house, and the playing wall and the outer wall of the enclosure were certainly too smooth and high up to be scaled.

Yet Don Leandro had vanished and the boxes with him. It was as though the earth had swallowed them up.

Inocencia had already taken her seat. Before mounting to the wheel, Rex stooped down to put the starting-handle on the floor of the car. Inocencia moved her feet to one side and Rex noticed her shoes.

They were smeared with sand and stained with seawater. On one a little strand of green seaweed was clinging to the welt.

CHAPTER XIV

THE WOMAN WITH THE CROONING LAUGH

SAINT-JEAN-DE-LUZ is a miniature, like one of those reflections in a convex mirror which the Dutch Old Masters delighted to brush. Everything is on a reduced scale. A mass of detail, crystal clear in the limpid air of the Pyrenees, is squeezed into the perfect horseshoe of the tiny bay, between the breakwater of Sainte-Barbe, long and flat in the water like the tail of a sea monster, and the purplish tower of Socoa Fort.

There is nothing large about Saint-Jean-de-Luz. On the land side the towering mountain of La Rhune, changing colour all through the day like a bruise, frowns contemptuously down upon the little plage, and to seaward the tremendous Atlantic rollers thunder against the barrier of the Artha Rocks, which, lying between the two horns of the bay, protect the shore. There is a miniature casino, some miniature hotels, a miniature sea-walk, and some miniature streets rambling about the grey walls of the old church. To Sally, walking in the warm sunshine on the beach in front of the Pergola Casino, it all seemed so daintily small and compact that she felt certain, were Rex here, she must, sooner or later, meet him face to face.

It was more than a week since her meeting with Rupert Forsdyke; four days since she had started working at Valia's, the little jumper shop near the Casino of Saint-Jean-de-Luz. After parting from Rupert that Saturday afternoon, she had gone to keep her appoint-

ment with the Suvorines. She had asked Olga to let her take a holiday. She could be spared, she knew. Next day the Grand Prix was to be run at Longchamp and thereafter the Paris season, like some very old person, would slowly and imperceptibly die.

Sally told Olga she thought of going to Saint-Jean-de-Luz. San Sebastian, being in Spain, meant a visa on her passport and she grudged the delay. Olga was acquainted with everybody who mattered in the world of frocks, and through her Sally hoped to find at Saint-Jean-de-Luz, or, failing this, at Biarritz, which is close by, some employment which should furnish an explanation of her presence in the event of her running into Rex. That this explanation would be threadbare, the coincidence indefensible, in her restless, uncertain mood she did not stop to consider.

With her thousand dollars almost intact she had no qualms about money. But she represented to Olga that she must have work to help her out with her vacation. She had not mentioned her marriage to Olga, and sometimes wondered whether her friend had seen in the *New York Herald* the brief paragraph which was the only announcement.

Anyhow, Olga, dear, great-hearted Olga, had once more come to the rescue. Perhaps she knew more than she pretended: perhaps without precise information her quick Russian intelligence had divined something of the truth. She made no promise at the time, but the very next evening she telephoned to say she had found Sally a job at Saint-Jean-de-Luz. On the following Thursday, which would be July first, Madame Himmelschrei, trading as Valia's, was opening her shop for the season there. Valia's would be glad to employ Mademoiselle

Sara as manageress on a commission basis without salary.

After an uneventful journey by road from Paris, Sally reached Saint-Jean-de-Luz on the Wednesday evening and went to work next day. Valia's was a dwarf of a shop, painted, as to the exterior, the vividdest of yellows, and decorated within with gigantic sprays of mimosa straggling across a primrose ground. Besides jumpers and pull-overs, Valia's stocked all manner of pretty underwear, Batik scarves, and a few Spanish shawls and mantillas.

Madame Valia, as the proprietress liked to be addressed, looked exactly as a dark Jewess might be expected to look after taking a header into a tank of peroxide. She was fifty and fat and lazy, with black and beady eyes that sparkled not unkindly from under an untidy thatch of short guinea-gold hair. Sally soon discovered that her principal duty was to look after the shop of an afternoon while Madame slipped across to the Casino to take a hand of baccarat.

At noon every day Valia's closed until two, and Sally went back to lunch at the small hotel on the boulevard at the back of the town where she had found a room. After lunch she liked to walk on the firm, yellow sand of the shore. At that hour the beach was deserted. The bathers, who every morning clustered like flies about the diving-raft, had gone off to lunch; the fruit-sellers and the itinerant photographers had followed suit; and only on the terrace of the Pergola, jutting out like a bow window upon the strand above the cavernous entrance of the *établissement des bains*, did the murmur of voices, the rattle of knives and forks, and the flash of hurrying waiters disturb the peace of the plage.

Already Sally was repenting of her rash decision. Only the night before, as the unique entry for a long and lonely Sunday, she had written in the Log, heavily underscoring the words: '*I must cure myself of my damnable impulsiveness.*' Impulse had rushed her into marriage, impulse had rushed her into flight, impulse had rushed her into this wild-goose chase. It had seemed such an exhilarating adventure, this journey in quest of her husband, when she had started out from Paris, and the thrill had lasted while she rolled off her two hundred and fifty kilometres a day, the wheels of the car drumming out upon the road the name that was always in her thoughts.

But twenty-four hours of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, slowly stirring from its springtime sleep, had sobered her, and four days of loneliness had driven her almost frantic. She need not have been lonely. There was a French officer staying in her hotel who was always asking her to let him take her to dance at the Pergola; and a sinuous Latin, with hair like black sateen, who had followed her down the sea-front the day after her arrival, had twice called at the shop to ogle her.

Yvonne, the sempstress at Valia's, a bouncing Bayonne wench, with cheeks like pink enamel and a sex complex of the most elementary description, reproached Sally for not giving the dashing don a little encouragement. He was an Argentine millionaire, Yvonne — who knew everybody at Saint-Jean-de-Luz — declared, and certainly good for a pearl necklace, a limousine, and a villa at Auteuil, a combination which, where men were concerned, appeared to be fixed as the immutable zenith of the damsel's aspirations.

But Sally shunned company. Only she feared as

much the intimacy of her own thoughts. Now, as she stood and gazed forlornly out to sea, her mind seemed to be like the great waves which, day and night, flung their curtain of spray high over the rugged outline of the Artha Rocks at the mouth of the bay. She, too, was fretting fruitlessly at an immovable mass, worrying at this problem which left her no peace. She had come here to find Rex. But if she found him, what should she say, what should she do?

She glanced at her watch. It was five minutes to two: time to be going back to the shop. She turned and began to walk slowly up the beach towards the grey stone mass of the Pergola. The terrace, glazed in like the promenade deck of a liner against the uncertainties of the weather, was very gay. The windows were folded back and at the little tables, bright with flowers, people in summer clothes were idling over their lunch.

At one of the end tables of the terrace a girl and a man sat. The man had his back to Sally, but she could see that his companion, who faced her, was elegant and strikingly handsome. Even a back in a grey flannel jacket may be eloquent, and there was deference and gallantry in the way the man leaned across the table towards his vis-à-vis. Sally had a rapid pang. She was thinking of the last time she had lunched at a little table on a terrace overlooking the sea. But alas! the old days of Cannes were far away...

From the back the man had quite a look of Rex. He had the same sleek dark head. How gay those two were! The woman's laugh, crooning, delighted, affectionate, drifted out across the sands. Then the man turned to call a waiter and Sally saw his face...

It was Yvonne's voice in her ear that brought her to

her senses; Yvonne, who stood beside her on the beach, holding down her skirt against the indiscreet gusts of the wind and laughing.

‘Nom d’une pipe!’ she cried gaily, ‘what have you to stare at like that, petite? Has the Prince of Wales come to Saint-Jean-de-Luz, or is it Georges Carpentier?’ And she began to bounce up and down on the sand, craning her neck to get a better view.

Desperately, Sally took herself in hand. She tried to laugh naturally. ‘Nothing so romantic,’ she said. ‘I was only looking at a woman lunching up there on the terrace. She’s very pretty: I wonder who she is. Do you see the one I mean, at the end table, in a drab suit...?’

Yvonne began to giggle. ‘Tu parles, ma petite,’ she remarked idiomatically. ‘Pretty? She’s exquisite! There’s charm for you! There’s chic and diablerie! That’s Doña Inocencia Santin, a great friend of Madame’s and one of our best customers! She thinks nothing of spending three thousand, four thousand francs in an afternoon. She lives at San Sebastian, but she’s over here quite often once the season’s started. This is the first time I’ve seen her here this year. I expect she’ll come to the shop after lunch...’

‘Who...who is the man with her, do you know?’—asked Sally, praying that the girl might not notice the quaver in her voice.

Yvonne followed the direction of Sally’s glance.

‘Don’t know him. But Doña Inocencia always has a man along. There’s one who knows how to amuse herself, allez! She’s making hay while the sun shines, and I don’t blame her, with her looks and style! We’re only young once, pas vrai? Oh, la la, if only I had a

quarter of her chances...' She sighed heavily and turned to Sally. 'It's after two; we'd best be getting back...'

Sally was stunned. So it was a woman, after all! She returned to the shop, her heart sore with bitterness. It was his insouciance that hurt her most. Always the woman's laughter seemed to ring in her ears.

She had not overlooked the possibility of there being another woman. But she had always thought that Rex would have regrets. If she had pictured him going back to an old liaison which, when it came to the point, he was not strong enough to give up, it had invariably been in a reluctant, a chastened mood. She had never looked to find him thus gay, gallant, assiduous, nor had she ever dreamed — and this was the bitter pill — that the woman would be so flawlessly alluring as this one.

But was she an old flame? Might she not be a new adventure? Then how did the police come into the picture? Before her mind rose up the image of Inspector Barbier, fingering his yellow moustache, while his keen grey eyes ferreted in her face.

Suddenly Sally felt vindictive towards this woman with the crooning laugh. If Doña Inocencia brought Rex with her to Valia's, things would be difficult. She began to wonder about Doña Inocencia and, wondering, mentally resolved to find out more about her. But Fate had forestalled her decision. Already in the great dim workshop, where men's and women's destinies are spun, the looms were busy...

CHAPTER XV

DUSK AT USOTEGIA

MOST of the afternoon Sally was out of the shop. She had to go to the bank for Madame and to the parcels office at the railway to clear a consignment of goods. When she returned to Valia's, she found the place looking as though it had been sacked. The window had been almost stripped of its contents, the shelves ransacked. The nosey, long-legged little girl in pigtails, who was the other assistant at Valia's, was folding up jumpers and scarves and camisoles and putting them away.

Yvonne, busy with her needle, was in the back shop.

'Madame out?' said Sally, pulling off her straw cloche.

Yvonne nodded. 'She says she dreamed of nines last night. Besides, we've had a good afternoon...'

'Busy?'

'Doña Inocencia's been here! I told you she'd probably call in...'

Sally, who was before the mirror, shaking her short hair to rights, became perfectly still. Very deliberately then she hung up her hat on one of the pegs along the wall.

'She bought the jade green jumper suit,' Yvonne rattled on, moistening her thread between her lips, 'and the yellow jumper — you know, the Chanel model — and three of the new Batiks, and some of those lace handkerchiefs. Zut! she refused herself nothing to-day...'

In the front shop Sally was mechanically setting things straight. She was wondering when she might venture to put the question that was burning her tongue.

‘I’m altering the jumper suit for her now,’ Yvonne continued, holding her needle up to the light. ‘It’s got to be ready by to-morrow afternoon; she’s coming in to fetch it. It’ll never be ready: I’ve two other orders promised for to-morrow. She tried on in here. Her underthings are lovely. And such skin, *ma chère*! One would say white velvet. Oh, *la belle créature*!’

She shook back her mop of black hair and bent to her sewing again.

Sally brought a stack of jumpers and rather viciously dumped them down on the shelves behind the sempstress.

‘Did...did she bring her man friend with her?’ she asked at last.

The other looked up. ‘Her man friend? Oh, you mean the chap she was lunching with. There was a fellow outside in her car at the door. I expect he was the same, a nice-looking boy, he was. She told Madame he was going to drive her back to San Sebastian ’cos she’d hurt her hand and couldn’t drive herself. He must be her latest: at any rate, I’ve never seen him before to-day...’

A squeaky voice piped up from the doorway between the two rooms. The pig-tailed little girl, rather red in the face from stooping, her mouth full of pins, was nodding at them mysteriously.

‘I know who it was,’ she announced. ‘It was an Englishman. The lady said to Madame: “I can’t stop any longer,” she said, “or my English savage outside will be furious.” I don’t think he looked very savage; I thought he had a very pleasant face, though rather

triste. You ought to have seen the way he smiled at her when she came out!' She smiled impishly. 'She's got him well trained, va! I think he's her lover...'

'Maud,' snapped Yvonne shrilly, 'will you go back this minute and pick up all those threads off the carpet? A nice flea in the ear you'll get from Madame if she comes back and finds the place looking like a pig-sty...'

Maud withdrew with an affronted air.

'As sharp as a needle she is!' remarked Yvonne to Sally admiringly. 'She doesn't miss a thing, that child!'

But Sally had turned away. So Rex was at San Sebastian with this woman! 'My English savage,' she had called him. Sudden wrath made Sally's cheeks grow hot. If she'd been in the shop that afternoon, she told herself, she'd have made a point of escorting Doña Inocencia to the door, nay, to her very car, just to have the satisfaction of seeing Rex's face when he recognised his wife. Nothing, she resolved, would induce her to stir from the shop on the following afternoon. She was seized with a desire to study this woman, a sort of desperate caprice to discover for herself in how many points of looks and of general attraction she was outmatched...

But Doña Inocencia did not call next day. Late in the afternoon she telephoned to say that she would not have time to come in, but that she would be dining at Usotegia — Madame knew the place, old Catarina's house; would they send the frock out there? Madame, who answered the telephone, thereupon told Yvonne, who was still working on the dress, that she would have to take it out to Doña Inocencia at Usotegia as soon as it was finished.

Sally, whose attention had been aroused by the mention of Doña Inocencia's name, saw how, at the order, Yvonne's face fell. But the sempstress voiced no protest. Madame was not in the mood to be crossed. Not even the most unsubstantial of dream nines had brightened her sojourn at the baccarat table on the previous afternoon, and her temper was short in consequence. So Yvonne only murmured, 'Bien, Madame,' in a sulky tone, and Madame departed for the Casino.

But the moment the shop door had closed, the tears burst forth in a flood. One was not a negro slave, to work one's fingers to the bone for an unsympathetic patronne, who couldn't realise that a girl was only young once and had her good right to enjoy herself! Had not Bertrand, sobbed Yvonne, a most presentable boy who owned a Bugatti car, arranged to meet her at seven o'clock that evening and take her off to Biarritz to dance at the Bar Basque? Why should she have to tramp out halfway to Hendaye? She wasn't a messenger. The alterations were perfectly simple: she had often fitted Doña Inocencia before. One had only to see the dress on for the form, et puis, bon soir! If this dear Sara, who had her own car, happened to be free after dinner: Madame need never know...

Sally said she would deliver the suit. After all, why not? Madame had said that Doña Inocencia sometimes went over to this house where she was dining to see her old nurse. It was improbable that Rex would be there, and Sally would have the opportunity of speaking with, and studying, at leisure, this woman who had stolen her husband. Paul, the lame Basque who swept out the shop and put up and took down the shutters, told Sally how to find the house. He advised

her to leave the car at the fort and go the rest of the way on foot, as the road was bad: Usotegia was only about ten minutes' walk along the cliff.

The suit was not ready until just on seven, and when Sally went to the garage to fetch her car she found that one of the tyres was flat. As the mechanic would not be back from his supper to change the wheel for another hour, she decided to have a quick dinner and start immediately afterwards. If she got to Usotegia by nine, it would be time enough.

The red ball of the sun had already slipped down below the horizon when she started out. The air was intensely clear and La Rhune, and all the hills about, glowed in the reflection from the western sky. The sense of adventure was strong upon Sally as she threaded the quaint old water-front of Ciboure, with its gaudily painted Basque houses, and took the winding, leafy road past the Réserve to Socoa.

She parked her car on the side of the road outside the last of the houses overlooking the little dockyard and, her box under her arm, began to climb the path. The evening was still and the silence brought the breathless cough of a motor-boat, somewhere off the point, surprisingly near. In a little while the low roof of the house she was in search of, seeming to rest like a lid upon its high, surrounding wall, stood up before her against the crimson sky.

In default of any bell or knocker she banged on the timber gates with a stone. After a long interval an old woman poked a sour and suspicious face out of the wicket. When she heard the girl's business, she beckoned her in. She brought her through a gravelled yard under a trellis-work of vines to a dilapidated harbour

set against the wall. She dusted with her apron one of the chairs which stood about a rustic table there, muttered in her thick patois that 'Madame' would not be long, and hobbled away. Her feet sounded on the gravel, then the black square opening of the porch swallowed her up and silence fell once more.

Sally sat down and waited. Already it was dusk under the vines. The bats flashed to and fro about the yard. There was a smell of cooking in the air, but an unfamiliar odour, musky, exotic. From the tall chimney stack a pencil of smoke mounted straight into the still evening. Steadily the darkness deepened.

How quiet the old house was, how quiet and how black! The dining-room, Sally decided, must be at the back. On the front no light showed and the windows were all closed. No, one was open, on the top floor, where a decrepit balcony ran the length of the house.

How swiftly the twilight died! Now above the dark tracery of leaves the sky was like a film of blue glass and each slim post of the trellis-work stood out hard and sharp. Sally could barely distinguish the face of her watch. The hands pointed to a quarter to ten.

Suddenly, from somewhere within the house, a strange falsetto voice began to sing. High-pitched and fluty, it ran up and down half a dozen half-notes, repeated again and again, in a melancholy refrain which had no music to it, but only rhythm. Then the singing abruptly ended, a shuffling step padded softly on woodwork that creaked, and on the balcony above her head, Sally, peering upward through the vines, in the direction of the sound, saw a white shape emerge.

It was a tall figure shrouded from top to toe in white. A cowl, pointed like a monk's, enveloped the head, and

below the hood the features, seen in the gloom, were no more than a blur. Sally was horribly frightened. Her heart seemed to miss a beat as she shrank back in her chair under the darkling arbour, unable to take her eyes from the balcony. The white robes of the apparition seemed to merge into the pallid tones of the plastered house-front, so that the figure, as it remained immobile at the balustrade, had something of the horribly vague and intangible air of a sheeted corpse. Behind it, the old house, dark and mysterious and wrapped in its stealthy hush, was as the tomb that has given forth its dead.

And then the white shape had vanished. It might have been absorbed into the gathering shades of night, so unaccountably did it fade away. Only the faint squeak of crazy woodwork, the sound of a casement closed gently, told the girl in the yard below that someone who had stood out upon the balcony had returned to the house.

She sprang to her feet and seized her box. She was not going to wait in the dark any longer. She would knock up the old woman, leave the dress, and go straight home. But before she was out of the arbour, a slight sound at the far end of the yard caught her ear. In terror she stopped dead.

The sound she had heard appeared to come from behind a pair of high green doors which faced the gates by which she had entered. The trellis-work of vines was not carried as far as this carriageway, and here, in the open, a little light yet persisted. She could see the green doors shaking. Someone, on the other side, was trying them.

With dread she watched and waited. The sound

ceased. Then a hand appeared, gripping the top of the door; for an instant a straddling figure hung poised, and the next moment a man dropped lightly into the yard.

It was Rex. The last rays of daylight struck full on his face as he stood with head raised, peering down the yard in a listening attitude. He was hatless and his eyes were very anxious. But he wore such an alert and eager air that Sally, concealed in the dimness of her harbour, felt that his mere presence restored her courage.

But before she could make up her mind to step forth and reveal herself, there came the throbbing of a car outside the entrance gates. Without a moment's hesitation, Rex turned and flung himself at the green doors again. With noiseless ease he drew himself up and dropped on the other side even as the wicket was flung open and, above the chugging of the motor, a confused snatch of voices drifted into the yard.

The horn was blown several times and a man shouted for Catarina. The old woman emerged from the house at a quick scramble with a lamp in her hand.

'Voilà, Madame!' she said to Sally, who had crossed to the front door, and hastened to the wicket.

A door banged and there was the sound of a car being driven away. Two figures, following Catarina with the lamp, came slowly across the yard. One was Doña Inocencia, the other a man draped in a black Spanish cloak.

A glimmer of light shone through the open house door upon Doña Inocencia's face. It had a look of strain and the mouth was petulant. Catarina stopped in front of Sally, but the woman swept by.

'Leandro,' she said over her shoulder as she entered

the house, 'have the goodness to give this girl something and send her away. She can leave the dress; I'm too tired to try it on to-night.'

Her companion halted and pushed back his large-brimmed hat from his forehead. Sally saw an aged face that was like a withered lemon, with swimmy eyes that leered uncleanly as, with voluptuous deliberation, they appraised her face and figure.

The old man was fumbling with his purse. He took the box from Sally and pressed a note into her hand. His fingers were scaly and clammy. He wheezed a senile chuckle and his free hand went out and sought to fondle her cheek. Sally drew back swiftly and the note fell to the ground. The old man cackled again and stepped daintily into the house.

Catarina picked up the note. Sally bade her keep it. The old woman bobbed her thanks and, carrying the lamp, escorted the girl to the wicket.

The moon had risen now. The track by which she had come, winding round the outside of the enclosure, gleamed white in the pale light. As Sally turned the angle of the wall, she came upon a man standing in the centre of the path. On seeing her, he doffed his hat with an urbane 'Good-evening, madame!'

It was Inspector Barbier.

CHAPTER XVI

IN WHICH SALLY HEARS A STORY AND STRIKES A BARGAIN

IF she were taken aback, not so the detective. Under the cloth cap he was wearing, Inspector Barbier's round, fresh-coloured face was perfectly impassive. He appeared to have been waiting for her. He must have read in her mien that she knew him again, for he made no attempt to introduce himself.

'Ah, madame, it is dangerous that you are thus alone on the cliff at night,' he said in his careful English, falling into step with her as she walked along.

'I can take care of myself,' she answered coldly. She was thinking that, somewhere behind the wall they were skirting, Rex was in hiding. Obviously he had sought refuge at Usotegia from the detective's pursuit. If only she could draw the Inspector away from the house. She hurried her pace a little.

'There are tziganes — how do you say? — ah, gipsies — and other bad characters on the cliff after dark,' Barbier went on. 'You might make a disagreeable experience, madame!'

'I'd expected to be home long before this,' said Sally. 'I went to deliver a dress and they kept me waiting.'

'I know,' he put in simply.

'You followed me?'

He nodded.

'Why?'

He shrugged his shoulders: 'I look always for Monsieur Garrett...'

‘I don’t know where my husband is,’ she affirmed rather hastily.

He made a pause. ‘I will play the frank game with you, madame,’ he said at last, ‘show my cards on the table, as you say in English. When you’ve heard what I have to say, I believe you’ll recognise that we may help one another, you and I...’

‘As I told you before,’ she rejoined stiffly, ‘my husband has left me. And that’s the end of the matter as far as I’m concerned...’

‘Even if I make you know the motive of this disappearance?’

He caught the little fluttering gasp that broke from her lips, and sought to press home his advantage.

‘You see? I may be of service to you,’ he said.

‘You can’t expect me to aid the police against the man I’ve married,’ she replied in a low voice.

‘Madame,’ he told her gravely, ‘I, Philippe Barbier, as you see me now, am not the police. I am en congé, what you call on leave, from the Sûreté, on a private mission of my own choosing, to clear up the mystery of the murder of my brother, Félix Barbier, a member, like myself, of the Paris detective force. I apply for three months’ voluntary absence from duty because I do not rest until I know the truth. And the man who shall tell me is Monsieur Garrett!’

‘But what,’ she queried in a dazed tone, ‘can my husband know of the murder of your brother?’

‘Listen! At dawn, on May 28th — mark well the day, for it was the morning after your marriage! — one Pedro Gomez was guillotined in Paris for the murder of my brother. Monsieur Garrett was present at the execution...’

‘Present at the execution?’ she repeated, bewildered.
‘Are you sure of this?’

‘Madame, he was at my side, within a few feet of the scaffold...’

‘But what was he doing there?’

‘He was present by the wish of the condemned man...’

‘But did my husband know this murderer?’

‘It would seem so. As Gomez descends from the van, he cries out in a clear voice: “Thank you, my friend!” I was watching your husband. What first drew my attention to him was that he comes to the execution with the criminal’s lawyer—that, and the extraordinary paleness of his face. We detectives, we have a little the habit of studying faces, you know. Eh bien, directly the doomed man appears I see it in your husband’s eyes that he knows this Gomez. And at that cry Monsieur Garrett starts forward and then abruptly turns away, as though he would not look upon what was to follow...’

Sally had stopped on the path as it wound its way through the gorse. They were approaching the fort, a swarthy mass against the moonlit sea.

‘But who was this man Gomez?’ she asked in a husky voice.

‘That,’ replied the detective, and his mouth was grim, ‘is the mystery I go to solve. My brother was of the Passport Brigade, whose duty it is to control the papers of the foreign work-people who are in Paris so numerous. The day he was killed, he was visiting a house behind the Boulevard de la Chapelle, a poor quarter of Paris, madame, one of these great barracks where people swarm like rabbits. In these rough spots of the

city the police go in couples. But my brother was always reckless. To save time he says that he and Pascot — that is the name of the detective who accompanied him — shall separate and take the building storey by storey.' He paused and shook his head sadly. 'Ah, le malheureux! What exactly took place we shall never know, but Pascot, on the stairs, hears a scuffle on the floor above. It is the last storey, under the roof. As Pascot dashes up, a door opens and a man looks out, a man whose clothes are smeared with blood, with a knife in his hand. Pascot springs at him and drives him back into the room. On the floor my brother lies dead, stabbed to the heart.'

He broke off sombrely, pursing up his lips and knitting his brow.

'The murderer declined to say anything about himself,' the detective resumed presently. 'There is no record of him at police headquarters. Madrid reports him as a dangerous anarchist who has latterly been in Tangier, but knows nothing further about him. Our Consulate at Tangier confirms this report, but can give no details. There was no plausible reason why he should slaughter my brother like a pig, le misérable, except absolute savagery. But Gomez was not a ferocious type. I study him in prison: he is quiet and gentle. When I tell him I am brother of Félix, he makes me his excuses. But he will not speak. It is only after his execution that I find out that before he died he left a letter for Monsieur Garrett, your husband...'

It seemed as though a weight had been lifted off Sally's heart. Here at last, after how many weeks of doubt, a ray of light came filtering through the darkness. Her voice shook a little as she said:

‘Then it was to be present at the execution that my husband went away that night?’

‘C’est ça. Maître Chardon went out by automobile to your villa to fetch him...’

‘Maître Chardon?’

‘The prisoner’s counsel. It was from him, after failing with Monsieur Garrett, that I got these facts...’

‘You spoke to my husband, then?’

‘Immediately after the execution. He stands there with his back to the guillotine, his face ravaged with horror... ah, pour ça, I understand! To see a friend put under the knife...! Enfin, I show him my Sûreté card and ask if I may have a few words with him. He stares at me like a drunken man, then suddenly breaks away and plunges into the crowd...’

‘And you let him go?’

Barbier made a helpless gesture.

‘On what ground could I detain him? I was not even on duty: I was present on behalf of our family, of the victim’s family, as is the custom at executions in France. Then I went to Chardon. He was still at the prison...’

‘Had he known my husband before?’

The detective clicked with his teeth in the French form of negation.

‘Gomez sent him. It’s a strange story. Madame knows, perhaps, that in France a man sentenced to death is left in ignorance as to his fate until the very morning of the execution. His lawyer is notified the night before, but only when it is too late to communicate with the prison. Chardon explained this to his client. Gomez never had any hope of a reprieve, Chardon says; dame, when a policeman is murdered, the law knows no pity.’

They had strolled on. Below them on the road the tail lamp of the Talbot gleamed redly. The detective halted and leaned against the fencing of the path.

‘Alors,’ he resumed, ‘one afternoon — it was the day before the execution, but neither the prisoner nor his counsel knew it, bien entendu — Gomez hands Chardon an envelope. It is addressed to your husband. “Chardon,” he says, “you will know sooner than I. When you are notified, find, I beg you, the man to whom this letter is addressed, and bring him to the execution. I don’t know whether he is in Paris, but in a magazine which I have been reading there is mentioned an exhibition of his pictures to be held these days and you should hear of him there. If he is in Paris, I think he will come. If he makes any difficulty, give him this slip of paper!” And Gomez hands over a piece of paper containing two words...’

‘A piece of paper containing two words?’ repeated Sally quickly.

‘Two words, no more or less,’ Barbier retorted. ‘But two words too many, it appears, for this animal of a lawyer to have remembered...’

‘I’m as bad as he is,’ Sally put in humbly, ‘for I’ve forgotten them too...’

‘Comment?’ exploded the detective, ‘you saw this paper?’

Sally nodded guiltily. ‘It was lying on the ground before the villa gate after my husband disappeared...’

‘Did you keep it?’

She shook her head. ‘I threw it away. I didn’t pay any attention to it at the time. And for the life of me I can’t remember what was written on it. Nothing that made sense, anyway...’

Inspector Barbier sighed resignedly. 'Evidently,' he remarked, 'I have no luck. Enfin, to finish my story: Gomez says to Chardon: "Once," he tells him, "the man I speak of was my friend. If he has forgotten and refuses at any price to accompany you, destroy the letter unread. But if he comes, and I think he will, better not let him know where you take him, lest our very friendship should make him draw back. The name of Gomez will say nothing to him, and, even if he has read of the case in the newspapers, he will not know, when you see him, that the execution stands before." And Gomez bids the lawyer hold back the letter until the last moment and see that his man is posted in the front rank of those who stand by the guillotine. "For when I see the face of my friend in the crowd," says the prisoner, "his presence will tell me that he is willing to carry out my last wishes." And he explains to Chardon how he had hit upon this plan on learning from the prison authorities that day that he would not be allowed to have an interview with his friend, as men under sentence of death may receive no visits except from their lawyer or a close relation. And now you know,' concluded the detective, turning to Sally, 'why your husband was forced to leave you!'

'What I don't understand,' she said slowly, 'is why he should not have told me where he was going. After all, I was in the villa, not a minute away...'

'Ah,' rejoined Barbier darkly, 'that was Chardon's doing.'

And he described to her the vicissitudes of that night: how the lawyer, after leaving Gomez in the afternoon, drove to the exhibition and, having failed to find Rex there or at his hotel, was about to write him a note,

when, at nine o'clock, word came that the execution was to take place at dawn.

With tense interest the girl listened to the story of the long chase which had ended in the middle of the night at the villa gates.

'Figure to yourself this poor Chardon, madame,' said the detective. 'Having come so far, he could not risk your husband changing his mind. And he could not afford to delay. He had to have a last interview with his client, which meant he must be at the prison at least an hour before dawn. Mon Dieu, the situation was not easy! Chardon told me that the first sign of emotion he saw in Gomez was when, a few minutes before they took him to the scaffold, he gave the doomed man the news that your husband was within the police barrier on the boulevard outside. He says the tears came into the prisoner's eyes and he murmured as though to himself: "I knew he would not fail me!"'

A little silence fell between them. Sally broke it with a question:

'How did you know I was here?' she asked.

His smile was enigmatical. 'We have our sources,' he replied evasively. His grey eyes scanned her face enquiringly. 'Have I gained the right, madame, to put a question to you?'

Rather wistfully she bowed her head in assent.

'You have set my mind at rest on many points,' she said, 'and for that, believe me, Inspector, I am truly grateful. But I don't know whether I have the right to answer your questions...'

'Oh, madame,' he protested, 'your husband has nothing to fear from me...'

'Then why has he disappeared?'

His answer was an expressive movement of the shoulders.

‘Maybe my brusque appearance, there at the scaffold, frightened him away.’ His eyes narrowed as he gave her a shrewdly probing glance. ‘Did you know that he came to your hotel that morning?’

‘No,’ she assured him, genuinely surprised. ‘What time was that?’

‘When I was talking with you probably, otherwise I should have seen him. It was about eight o’clock. One of the chasseurs, who was coming on duty, passed Mr. Garrett in the hotel courtyard. On the steps your husband suddenly turned about and went away again. Obviously, he must have seen me in the lobby...’

‘But why should he avoid you?’

Again the eloquent shrug of the shoulders.

‘Probably because he deceives himself, because he thinks I shall prevent him from carrying out the mission entrusted to him by Gomez in that letter. As, for the rest, you do also, madame...’

He had challenged her directly. For the moment she was at a loss. Then she said in a low voice:

‘I know nothing of this mission of my husband’s...’

‘Are you so sure of that?’ He bent his brows at her. ‘Do you know what I ask myself, madame?’

She was silent, standing with her eyes on the ground.

‘I ask myself how it comes that you suddenly decided to take a holiday at Saint-Jean-de-Luz?’

‘You seem to know a great deal about my movements,’ she fenced. ‘Might I ask how long you’ve been here?’

‘As long as you have, madame,’ came the prompt reply.

He saw the trouble in her eyes as she looked up quickly.

‘You followed me from Paris, then?’ she said rather breathlessly. ‘Why?’

‘I thought the air of the Pyrenees would do me good,’ was the dry retort.

It was her, then, he had shadowed to the house on the cliff. Did it mean that he had not seen Rex? His questions seemed to show that he had no idea of Rex’s present whereabouts. In that case, what was Rex doing at Usotegia? What did his stealthy appearance in the courtyard back there portend? A clandestine meeting with that woman?

She told herself she would not be small-minded. Rex was her husband: her duty was still to him. Without his consent she had no right to disclose information that would give the clue to this secret which Rex, for reasons best known to himself, was so anxious to guard. Rex had asked her to trust him for a month. Well, the month was up, but she would trust him still.

The Inspector looked nettled. It would never do, she told herself, to offend him. Besides, a definite part was allotted to him in the plan which was gradually unfolding itself in her mind. So she let her eyes rest rather softly on the detective’s face.

Barbier was a young man and impressionable. His annoyance began to melt before the warmth of those clear and friendly eyes. He cleared his throat.

‘Voyons,’ he said, ‘you’re not going to stand in my way. It’s as much to your advantage as it is to mine to clear up this mystery.’ His voice hardened a shade. ‘Believe me, madame, I am better as a friend than as an enemy.’

‘I know,’ she declared impulsively, ‘and that is why I’m going to make you an offer. You will give me three days’ grace and at the end of that time I will tell you either all I know or nothing...’

‘But, madame...’ he began.

‘Wait!’ she bade him. ‘I make only one condition,’ she went on. ‘You will cease following me about. If I see that I am being shadowed, the arrangement’s off!’

He looked at her reflectively.

‘You mean,’ he suggested, ‘that you are going to consult your husband?’

‘You must ask me no questions,’ she told him earnestly.

His thoughtful eyes interrogated her.

‘Soit!’ he said after a long pause. ‘But one word more, madame! I am a Norman and Normans are tenacious. Remember, I never quit!’

She nodded briefly, and they went down to the car. As they descended the path, something stirred in the gorse, and a dark shape, as formless as a shadow, rising up, began to glide, stooping, from bush to bush, along the edge of the track in the direction of the Pigeon House.

CHAPTER XVII

THE KISS

No man goes so far, Cardinal Retz has said, as he who does not know where he is going. The epigram describes Rex Garrett's frame of mind when, on the day after his trip with Inocencia to Saint-Jean-de-Luz, he set out on the expedition which was to land him at nightfall in the courtyard of the old house on the cliff.

An unknown quantity had obtruded itself into his calculations. Don Leandro was the x in this problem he had undertaken to work out. Rex had the feeling strongly that in this case he would have to reverse the customary procedure and begin by establishing the value of the indeterminate factor.

There was something definitely sinister about the man. That first night on the terrace he had appeared to Rex to exude an atmosphere of evil. He was old, but without the gentleness of years, courtly, but with a sort of menace underlying his every movement. The expression of his features was stonily hard, like an idol's; and the hairless face, the dipping beak, the dull and sated eye, vaguely suggested some obscene and monstrous reptile dredged up from the fathomless depths of the ocean.

Rex had the sensation that this man, like a reptile, was cold and merciless and, like a reptile, potentially dangerous. In Don Leandro's company, or so Rex fancied, Inocencia appeared in a new light, as a colour will assume a different hue when laid beside another. It was as though the old man's personality gave out

a ray which illuminated a dark side of her nature. Only twice, and each time for no more than a fleeting instant, had Rex seen these two together; but he was conscious of the subtle change in the girl's temperament whenever Don Leandro was with her. As she might take off her gloves for a meal, she seemed to strip off all that was winning and appealing in her. Underneath was an Inocencia that Rex did not know, the Inocencia, brusque and direct, who had taken him by surprise on the morning of their excursion into France.

What were Don Leandro's relations to Inocencia? He had a sort of proprietorial way with her which indicated some close degree of intimacy, yet, withal, an air of deference which was not easy to analyse. He might be her guardian, or something of the kind: her lover, perhaps; more incredible things had happened: more important to establish were whether he or she were leader of the enterprise whose secret was locked away behind the green gates of the old fronton.

Of Don Leandro's presence at Usotegia, Inocencia breathed not a word. Rex wondered whether the old man were staying in the house. The point must be ascertained; for Don Leandro, Rex had resolved, was to be his next line of investigation.

They did not get home from Saint-Jean-de-Luz until nearly eight o'clock. Once they had left Usotegia behind, on their way to lunch, Inocencia sloughed off her early morning mood, and was as blithe and irresponsible as she had been curt and business-like before. It seemed to Rex that a weight had been lifted off her mind with the delivery of those mysterious boxes at the Pigeon House. After lunch she did some shopping and then proposed returning to the Pergola for tea. On the little

dance floor, open to the air, canopied by the azure vault of the sky, they danced in a throng of sunbrowned youths with Byron collars and maidens in summery frocks, while the saxophone mingled its wails with the cry of the seabirds on the shore, the pounding of the sea, and the flapping of the verandah curtains in the breeze.

She had told Rex he might take her out to dinner at San Sebastian. They would not dress, she said. They would go to a little place she knew of, near the port, where, she assured him, they had the best Spanish cooking in the Guipozcoa, which is the province of San Sebastian. At the modest fonda to which she brought him, barrels of wine stood along the wall on the sanded floor, and at the tables Basque fishermen and dockhands, self-contained and dignified as is their wont, ate their fish fry and drank the coarse red wine.

Inocencia took charge of the ordering of their dinner. She fluttered into the kitchen behind the patron to see what the house could offer, she cut the bread, she mixed the salad, she filled up their glasses with the dark purple Rioja. All through the meal she was in the highest of spirits, praising the food, chatting with the delighted fisher-folk at the adjoining tables, chaffing the patron.

As the evening wore on, the tavern began to empty, and by the time the coffee, in finger-thick china cups, arrived, they had the place to themselves. Presently Inocencia leaned forward and with her long fingers deftly drew Rex's cigarette-case from its accustomed place in the outer pocket of his coat.

'Twice,' she remarked in an aggrieved tone, 'I've asked you for a cigarette. You compel me to help myself!'

'I'm most frightfully sorry,' he apologised; 'I'm

afraid I didn't hear you; I was thinking of something else...'

Which was true. He had been pondering, as all the afternoon he had pondered, how, without exciting her suspicion, he could extract from her some information about Don Leandro.

'It's not very flattering to me,' she pouted. 'You've hardly opened your mouth during dinner. Is it your revenge because I was so cross this morning?'

No such thing was in his mind, he protested, as he held the match for her cigarette.

'You must make the most of me this evening,' she said, blowing out a cloud of smoke, 'I'm going away to-morrow!'

His heart went cold within him. What did this move portend?

'Going away?' he faltered.

Through a little drift of blue smoke she gave him an entrancing smile.

'Oh, Riccy,' she exclaimed, 'you look as if you really minded...'

'Of course I mind,' he told her. His voice grew eager: 'You don't mean to say you're leaving San Sebastian for good?'

Affectionately she patted his hand and crooned her cooing laugh.

'I was only teasing. But I have to be away for a week. Biarritz. Ugh! I hate the idea. Nothing but fleas and cheap trippers at this time of year. But I must go to see my lawyer about my mother's estate. Such a nuisance, Riccy! I shall miss you, my dear...'

'You can't drive with that hand of yours,' he remarked. 'You'd better let me take you over in the car.'

I've no plans, as you know. Biarritz or San Sebastian, it's all one to me, provided you're there!

'You said that as though you meant it,' she answered smilingly. 'But I can't let you come. Biarritz always means a tiresome round of visits to old friends of my family. I'm afraid some of the old duennas would have a fit if I turned up accompanied by a young man...'

'I could drive you over and come back by train,' he persisted.

She shook her head. 'I've promised to let Don Leandro take me.'

The name pricked him into vigilance.

'Of course, as between me and Don Leandro...' he began with a semblance of touchiness.

'You're not going to be jealous of Don Leandro, surely?'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'Jealous, no! But he seems to specialise in being where he's not wanted...'

She laughed. 'If you knew the lecture he gave me the other night! Don Leandro has old-fashioned ideas, Riccy...'

'You mean he disapproves of me?'

'He disapproves of any young man who takes an interest in me,' was the evasive answer.

'What business is it of his?' grumbled Rex.

'Don Leandro is a very old friend of our family,' Inocencia replied. 'He's known me since I was a child. I expect he thinks it his duty to keep an eye on me...'

'Did he disapprove of de Mathis and the other fellow, too?'

She laughed. 'He would have, I'm sure, if he'd been here. But he only arrived on Sunday...'

That was the night, Rex noted to himself, on which Don Leandro had surprised them together on the terrace. The old man had come straight to Inocencia on arrival, then. And the very next day he had met her, by appointment undoubtedly, at Usotegia.

Inocencia was speaking. 'I shall catch it in the morning. I'm supposed to be dining with Don Leandro to-night.'

'Where? At the hotel?'

She nodded guiltily. 'He was coming over to dine and spend the night, as we want to get off early in the morning.'

'He's not staying in San Sebastian, then?'

Rex wondered whether his question rang too eager. But she answered quite frankly,

'No. He's over on his yacht at Saint-Jean-de-Luz.'

A yacht! Instantly Rex recalled Inocencia's shoes all stained with sea-water as he had seen them that morning. No yacht could ride in safety off the barren and rock-bound coast below the house on the cliff: this craft of Don Leandro's must be one of the vessels which Rex had seen at Saint-Jean-de-Luz lying at their berths within the breakwaters enclosing the bay. Inocencia's shoes showed that she had been on the seashore. Rex did not think she would have had time to go out to the yacht. It looked to him as though she had met Don Leandro, for some reason or other, on the beach and brought him up to the house. It was natural to suppose that there was a path or a stairway leading from the house to the shore. But Don Leandro's inexplicable disappearance suggested some hidden exit from the fronton. It was quite possible, in this land of inveterate smugglers, that a secret passage connected it with the beach.

He would have liked to question further, but he felt he must tread warily.

And the next moment Inocencia said: 'He'll be very cross with me, I suppose, for not letting him know. But I didn't feel in the mood for Don Leandro this evening. Tell me, Riccy, are you going to miss me?'

'You know I am, Inocencia,' he replied.

'Oh,' she cried, 'how cold that sounds! Can't you see I'm longing to be told that you're going to be perfectly miserable, that you'll count every second of the time until I come back, that life without me will be like one of those storm spells on our Basque coasts when the sun hides its face and rain sweeps down from the mountains and the waves roar man-high on the shore?' She paused, her chin propped on her fingers, while her eyes, bold and adventurous, looked expectantly into his. 'Do you know why I left Don Leandro in the lurch to-night?' she asked, and, before he had time to reply, 'I wanted to hear you say you loved me!' she added softly.

She broke off, half jesting, half in earnest, and waited for him to speak. He did not answer at once. Now that he was faced with this situation he had deliberately provoked, a wave of shame for the rôle he had assumed swept over him and left him tongue-tied. He knew he must say something. There are silences which no woman will forgive. But, to find fortitude to conquer his revulsion, he had to throw his mind back to the terrible memory of that May morning on the Boulevard Arago.

He shrugged his shoulders.

'What's the use, Inocencia? You know you're only amusing yourself with me...'

‘It’s not true!’ she cried.

‘If I were anything more than a passing fancy of yours,’ he retorted, ‘you’d never leave me behind to-morrow when you go to Biarritz. How can I love you when you shut me out of your life?’

‘Give me a week, Riccy,’ she pleaded. ‘If I could take you with me I would, but, believe me, it’s impossible. Once this legal bother is cleared up, I’ll come back to you. If you want me still, I’ll go anywhere you like with you then. Life has not been kind to me, my friend. I’m so deathly tired that sometimes I think I’ll make an end of things once and for all. When my business at Biarritz is done, you shall take me away and we’ll find peace together. Until then be patient, my dear. One day you’ll understand...’

She broke off as the landlord brought the bill and, glancing in the mirror of her vanity case, dabbed on a little powder and touched her lips with rouge. Then they went out into the quiet moonlit street, and Rex drove her back to the hotel.

The lift was out of order and they walked up the stairs together, Rex carrying the girl’s leather overcoat. She let him bring her to her bedroom door. There she took her coat from him and held out her hand. Right and left the corridor ran, dimly lit, deserted.

‘Good-night,’ she said, ‘I’ve had such a happy day. Oh, Riccy, dear, be fond of me while I’m away.’ Suddenly she put out her arms and swiftly drew his face to hers. Once again the faint scent of violets enveloped him as the soft warmth of her lips was on his mouth. The pale beauty of her face as, with eyes half-veiled, she looked up hungrily from that first embrace, the yielding limpness of her, as she clung to him, intoxicated him,

and he fiercely returned her kiss, clasping her in his arms. With a little crooning sigh of contentment, she let her head fall back against his coat.

‘Oh, Riccy,’ she murmured, ‘why didn’t I meet you ten years sooner?’

The words brought him back to his senses. On the instant he bitterly repented of his moment of weakness. She sought his lips again; but this time it was she who kissed. Then, with a happy smile, she gently detached herself from his arms, softly opened the door behind her, and was gone.

Rex went slowly up to his room. Having bolted the door, he unlocked the suitcase he had bought at San Sebastian and drew from a pocket a long envelope. It bore the words: ‘*Pour mon ami, Rex Garrett.*’ From the envelope he took some sheets of foolscap pinned together, covered with fine writing in violet ink, and turned to the closing passage, which, in many readings, he had underscored in pencil.

Translated from the original French the passage ran:

Inocencia’s instructions to Klau make it clear that the affair, whatever it may be, is to be launched not earlier than the first and not later than the thirtieth of June. The intention was evidently to leave ample time for Klau and Forsan, who, as I have set forth above, are both dead, to report at the rendezvous. I do not know whether their failure to appear will lead to a change of plan, but whenever you receive this letter—I have a presentiment it will be within the next few days—you will have until June thirtieth to unearth this conspiracy and bring this infamous woman to justice. Had circumstances been different, I would have discharged this duty myself, but now, in my great need, I turn to you, old

friend, in the confident hope that you will take my place. Standing as I do upon the threshold of eternity, I strive to have no bitterness; but I want to save others, I want to save my country, from this creature who has wrecked my life. Find her out, track her down, and make her harmless for ever. This is the last prayer of your friend,

LUIS LARRAGA

At the Santé Prison, this 27th of May

The thirtieth of June! And this was the fifth of July! As Larraga had foreshadowed, the plans had been changed; but with the arrival of Don Leandro things were beginning to move. With a pang of bitter remorse he realised that this woman he had come to destroy had already begun to throw her spell about him. That kiss of his, he felt, had betrayed both Sally and his dead friend.

Well, he was warned now. He would be pitiless. This wanton should get no mercy from him. Sombrely, mouth hard, eyes smouldering, he stared at the paper. It would have to go. The moment for action had arrived, and, when he played the trump card he was holding back for the supreme emergency, he could not risk Luis Larraga's letter falling into wrong hands.

He struck a match and touched it to the foolscap. As he watched the leaves curl up and blacken amid the licking flames, a pale face rose up before him with yielding mouth and tender eyes. With a sort of desperate fury he stamped the ashes to powder in the grate and, flinging his valise upon the bed, started to pack.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT THE MOUSE-HOLE

THE offices of Maître Gurutzia, notary at Saint-Jean-de-Luz, were situated on the first floor of an ancient and pot-bellied mansion on the Place Louis XIV. A worm-eaten door on the black and mildewed stair led through an ante-chamber into the high-pitched room where, year in, year out, the notary squatted as though nibbling, like a rat in a granary, at the dusty dossiers which surrounded him. With his domed bald pate, his patriarch's beard of white tinged with yellow, like snow in a thaw, his capacious stomach bulging out of his waistcoat where little mounds of snuff reposed like stone-heaps on a hillside, he appeared as old, as paunchy, and as frowsy as the house itself.

Rex Garrett, who had not seen him for twenty years, marvelled that a man could have changed so little. It was Maître Gurutzia who had conducted the negotiations that had uprooted the urchin from his Basque valley and replanted him in the bewildering environment of a Kentish vicarage. Nothing in the room, even, seemed to have altered. It still smelt of parchment and dust and cobwebs as it had smelt that morning, when, a round-eyed lad of eleven in a Basque bonnet, Rex had learned of the astounding change in his fortunes. The moth-eaten armchair where his mother, in her best black silk, had sat so strangely agitated during the interview, still stood in its old place beside the desk.

'Tiens, tiens!' exclaimed the old man as he looked up from the note which Rex had sent in, 'is it possible?

The little Garat? Upon my soul,' he went on, adjusting his old-fashioned steel spectacles upon his nose, 'I should never have recognised you. What have you been doing with yourself all these years and how has life treated you?'

And with the inveterate curiosity of the provincial he began to cross-examine his visitor. Where did he live? What did he do? How much money did he make?

As briefly as might be, Rex answered the other's questions. He had not come to talk about himself.

'Your mother is dead, I think?' said the notary.

Rex nodded.

'And your... your...' The old man hesitated. 'Enfin, the person who paid for your education?'

The young man's face hardened. 'He's dead, too. At least, that was the inference when the allowance suddenly ceased. I had to turn to and fend for myself.'

'Well, well,' commented the other, changing the subject, 'everything has turned out for the best, I see. You have the prosperous air, my little Garat; an English lord, *ma foi!* one would say. And so you've come back to have a look at your native mountains?'

'I'm only passing through,' said Rex. 'I thought I must come in and shake hands. I don't remember Saint-Jean-de-Luz very well, but it seems much larger than it used to be...'

'It grows bigger every year,' replied the lawyer with a sigh. 'It's not the sleepy little place it was in my young days. But we mustn't complain. The tourists bring plenty of money into the town.'

'There seem to be a lot of Spanish visitors,' remarked Rex carelessly.

'Ever since the war they come in increasing numbers.

That's because the rate of exchange is in their favor.'

'I met a Spaniard at San Sebastian the other day,' said Rex, 'who told me he had a yacht here, Don Leandro de Ortiz. Do you know him?'

'By name very well. His yacht is the Aurora. She's in the bay now...'

'An interesting man, I thought...'

'A curious character. A man with a hobby...'

'A hobby?'

Maitre Gurutzia's whiskers stirred in a slow smile.

'A theory, let us say. Our friend is a believer in Atlantis...'

'You mean the lost continent that is supposed to have extended between Europe and Africa?'

'Exactly. They tell me that Don Leandro, as they call him round here, has a theory that we Basques are descendants of the original inhabitants of Atlantis. However that may be, he spends the greater part of the year cruising in the Atlantic between the Spanish and African coasts. I am not a scientist, but I believe there are striking resemblances in the geological formations. Since the spring, on and off, he's been calling at Saint-Jean-de-Luz. You will sometimes see him studying the rocks in the quieter parts of the beach, beyond the fort of Socoa, for instance. They say he's writing a book...'

'A harmless hobby, at any rate,' laughed Rex. 'And cheaper than baccarat. I suppose, like all these amateur yachtsmen, he travels round with a crowd of guests...?'

'On the contrary,' the notary replied, 'he lives like a hermit, they tell me. He arrives suddenly, stays for a week, or a month as the fancy seizes him, takes in

stores, and is off again. I don't think he's staying long this time. I saw his launch putting out with stores from the harbour as I came to the office this morning.'

Soon thereafter Rex rose to take his leave. Maître Gurutzia wanted to detain him, but his caller had no time to waste. At the door, however, a sudden idea came to Rex. The old notary was consulted by the peasants for miles around and knew all the tittle-tattle of the countryside. Might he not be able to throw some light on the house on the cliff?

So Rex said: 'You're very kind, Maître, but I'm going to do a day's work. There's a picturesque old place up there on the cliffs beyond Socoa I want to sketch in the morning light. I noticed it when I was out walking the other day. A house called Usotegia. I wonder if you know it?'

'I thought it had long since tumbled into the sea,' was the prompt reply. 'It must be nearly sixty years since I was up there. Old Latxague had it and the place was going to rack and ruin then. Does anybody live there now?'

'An old woman called Catarina...'

The lawyer shook his head. 'I don't know her. Latxague had a daughter, or was it a niece? My memory's not as good as it was. Usotegia was still an inn when I knew it. The Pigeon House, they called it. There used to be a pigeon engraved in stone over the door. Do the young people still go and dance there on Sunday afternoons?'

'I don't think so,' Rex replied. 'It's said to be a boarding-house now, but it looks deserted to me...'

The notary nodded his head. 'Once upon a time, by all accounts, the house had quite a vogue. Originally

it stood on the cliff road to Hendaye. Close to the frontier, it was, and handy for smuggling, you'll understand. A hundred years or so ago, my father used to tell me, the smugglers made the house their headquarters. There was talk of a secret passage running from the tavern to the beach. We lads were always hunting for it' — he smiled his senile smile — 'but we never found it. Then, little by little, the cliff fell away, carrying the road with it, and the old house was left standing with one foot in the air, as you might say. When I knew it, it was what the Parisians call a *guingette*, where one played handball for fifty centimes an hour and danced to a little Basque orchestra in the garden. Some of us lads used to take the shopgirls out there of a Sunday and play at hide-and-seek under the vines. There was a pretty creature called Marie, or was it Jeanne? She would dance the fandango with me. As light as a fairy she was, and her steps were beautiful. And the fire she put into it! She could snap her little fingers until they rattled like the castagnettes...' And in a quavering voice the old man began to hum a lilting tune, wagging his bald head to the beat, and feebly snapping his gnarled and chalky fingers. He broke off with a chuckle. 'She danced with me round the bonfire on the Feast of Saint John,' he wheezed, 'and afterwards I kissed her behind the church. She must be an old woman now, if she's not in her grave. I'm an old man, my little Garat, and one by one all the friends of my youth have died. Usotegia! To think it's still there! Tiens, tiens!'

His bleared eyes grew dreamy and his jaw drooped as he sat huddled up in his chair, staring at the stacks of flyblown documents encumbering the desk. So Rex

left the patriarch to brood over memories of the days that would come no more and, crossing the Old-World square, made his way along the sounding main street to the beach.

At San Sebastian that morning, from his bedroom window, he had watched Doña Inocencia and Don Leandro drive away. Then he had paid his bill and taken the train to Saint-Jean-de-Luz. He left his valise at the station, intending to find a room after his interview with the lawyer. But he would not stop now. It would be time enough to secure a lodging when his day's work was done.

He had moved to Saint-Jean-de-Luz to reconnoitre. With Inocencia and Don Leandro away, he would never have, he knew, a more favourable opportunity for examining the house on the cliff and its surroundings. He realised that by day it would be difficult to approach the place without attracting attention; he would have to wait for dark. His plan, in the meantime, was to spy out the land from the sea side.

If the passage of which Maître Gurutzia had spoken really existed, and Rex was beginning to think it might be more than a legend, it must emerge upon the rocks somewhere in the vicinity of the house. The entrance, of course, would be skilfully concealed, and it appeared to Rex that he would stand a better chance of discovering any such disturbance of the cliff's surface as would enable him to locate the opening by observation from the sea than by a haphazard hunt along the shore. With this idea in mind he had brought his Zeiss glasses, which were now tucked away in the pocket of his raincoat.

On the beach below the miniature esplanade he had the choice of a dozen skiffs. The sea was glassy under

a hot sun, for the wind had dropped. Rex foresaw a grilling trip. To the strand at the foot of the Pigeon House it was a long pull — across the bay, through the channel between the western breakwater and the Artha Rocks, and down past the fort of Socoa crouching on its purple base to the prolongation of the coast beyond.

Two or three yachts rode at anchor in the sunlit bay. Rex asked to be shown the Aurora. The boatman pointed to a rather clumsy-looking ketch with a black hull that lay under the lee of the western breakwater, a vessel perceptibly older and less showy than the others. Rowing awkwardly enough, for he had not touched an oar since his school-days, Rex gave the Aurora a wide berth as he pulled out towards the grey line of the Artha. He waited until the yacht was astern before resting on his oars to look her over.

With her broad waist and rather dingy paint, she wore a staid and matronly appearance in contrast with the graceful lines and shining whiteness of the other yachts. Under her discoloured awnings one had a glimpse of clean decks, gleaming teak hatches, and shining brasswork. But there were no signs of luxury about the Aurora, none of that wealth of cream paint, no palms and easy chairs, no white-jacketed stewards flashing to and fro, no trim hands in sun-hats and jerseys, such as the decks of the other yachts displayed. A grimy seaman in a striped, sleeveless vest and dirty canvas pants was polishing the brasswork of the rail, and a negro, stripped to the waist, was swabbing the deck with a brush.

The current, running swiftly in between the mole and the Artha, now swung the skiff about and the yacht's

side nearest the breakwater came into view. At the foot of the accommodation ladder a launch was tethered, from which a fat man was passing up petrol tins to an invisible figure on the deck. At the head of the steps, his arms resting on the rail, a burly individual was watching the operation. From his peaked blue cap and the brass buttons of his reefer jacket, Rex took him to be one of the yacht's officers. The Zeiss glasses showed a brick-red face under a sort of phalanx of stiff red hair, cropped very close, which stood up in bristles as though pushing the cap back from the forehead.

Presently the tawny head swung round and a stentorian voice shouted 'Max!' From the interior of the ship a hail came back. As the skiff drifted by, Rex caught the intonation, and, while he could not distinguish the words, he recognised the language to be German. And when the tawny man bawled back again he used the same idiom.

But by this the skiff was dangerously near the yacht. Rex picked up his oars, intending to head the boat down between the vessel and the breakwater and circle the yacht once more. But at that moment his eye fell on the man in the launch. A gross, flabby creature with an olive skin, he stood with his face in profile, waiting to pass up one of his cans. Rex recognised the surly Spaniard he had seen at Usotegia, the man who had shut the fronton gates behind him.

Absorbed in his work, the Spaniard did not turn round. Nor did Rex linger to court detection. He felt the tug of the tide as he drove the skiff towards the channel between the barriers. He was glad, at last, to double the breakwater and slip into slack water under

its shelter on the other side. Then with an easy stroke he began to paddle inshore.

As he rowed, his thoughts went hurrying down this new avenue of conjecture which his latest discovery, following his talk with the notary, had opened up. From point to point his mind swung, and as it followed them round seemed to discern between them, as yet dim, but gradually taking form, the pattern, like some intricate geometrical design, of the plot he had set himself to expose.

There was Inocencia running her mysterious boxes from Spain into France; there was Don Leandro and his yacht, manned in part, by Germans, provisioning for another cruise; and between the two, between the house on the cliff and the Aurora, this hidden channel of communication which had enabled Don Leandro to spirit himself and the boxes away. Inocencia on her side had her dealings with the Legion in Morocco, had recently, too, visited the country; while Don Leandro, for his part, had his lonely seafarings in the Atlantic and a pseudo-scientific pretext to justify his presence off the African shores.

Africa! Through the fog which still beset his goal the great continent was looming up, as at sunrise, on his first voyage to the East, he had seen the low coastline of the Nile Delta, with its plumes of palm, shimmer through the opalescent haze.

Was the answer to the riddle of the Pigeon House to be sought among the gloomy, yellow hills where Abdel Krim and his blue-clad tribesmen were furiously assaulting the road to Fez? The presence of Germans on board the Aurora seemed to support this theory; for Germans were known to be numerous in the Rifi forces.

But what could be the aim of a conspiracy whose headquarters were located on the frontier of two countries at war with the Rifis? Not gun-running, certainly: the risks were too great; besides, there could be no conceivable reason for assembling arms at Saint-Jean-de-Luz for transshipment to the Moroccan war-zone when they could be exported without difficulty from neutral states. Anyway, the boxes which Rex had seen did not contain arms or ammunition; for that they were clearly too light.

Inocencia's instructions to Klau, the dead German légionnaire, had seemed to point to some recruiting scheme. But in that case why should two deserters from the Legion be brought back all the way, at immense risk, from Morocco, when with far less trouble and not much more danger they could slip across to the Rifis through the front line or, if they were not at the front, by way of Tangier? No, the fixing of a date — not earlier than the first and not later than the thirtieth of June, Larraga's letter had said — surely indicated a definite enterprise and the Aurora had arrived to carry it out. But what this enterprise might be Rex felt himself completely at a loss to divine...

Opposite him now, as he lay on his oars, he could discern the red roof of the Pigeon House. From its precarious perch it seemed to be peering down upon the rocky beach. Under the first-floor windows the sun flamed in the panes of a long enclosed terrace, a sort of sun parlour, below which the cliff dropped sheer away. Thatched at the top with bleached grass and sparsely clothed in its descent with wind-stunted bushes, it sloped down to the beach in sharp ridges of rock scooped out by the waves. The beach was warm and

silent and deserted. Cabbage butterflies danced about the dark green bushes above, and, below, the sea, with a noisy, sucking sound, heaved in and out of the sword-edge rocks. All the rich brown cliff seemed to vibrate in the transparent light of noonday.

With the glass Rex thought he could trace the effects of the landslide which had carried the road away. In front of the cliff, and about halfway to the top, immediately below the house, was a solitary crag, tapering from a broad base to a long and narrow summit. It wore a toupet of coarse grass and a tousle of bushes straggled over its flanks. Between this rocky screen and the main cliff from which it had become detached, the fallen earth and stones formed a sort of ramp which, in the course of years, had become a tangle of greenery. But the glass disclosed no disturbance of the cliff's face nor any trace of an opening.

His instinct was to land forthwith and pursue his reconnaissance ashore. But here the skiff was an encumbrance. While he was away exploring, it must inevitably betray his presence to anybody who should come upon the beach. There was nothing for it but to take the boat back and return by the land on foot.

It was four o'clock and blisteringly warm when, scrambling painfully over the rocks from the direction of the fort, he sighted the solitary pinnacle upon which the Pigeon House looked down. He found the beach below as he had left it, quiet and desolate and all aswim with the heat quivering up from the rocks; and he noted with satisfaction as he gazed aloft that, from where he stood at the foot of the crag, the bulge of the cliff hid the house from view. From the land side, at any rate, he was safe from prying eyes. To seaward

the ocean spread its emptiness to the horizon, where the smoke of a steamer smeared the immaculate azure of the summer sky.

Eroded by wave and weather, the cliff swooping upward was scooped out like a Stilton cheese. Rex's heart sank within him as he surveyed its flat and crumbling face. Such caves as there were were mere depressions where the rock had shaled away and there was neither fissure nor cleft nor cavity to suggest the mouth of a passage. Enormous masses of rock, lying where they had fallen in the collapse of the cliff, stood here and there girt waist-high in seaweed, but, as far as Rex could determine, they were immovable and held no secret.

He went round the base of the rocky finger and started to swarm up the ramp which joined it to the cliff. The top of the ramp was a sort of green platform, all grown over with grass and brambles, about twenty feet above the beach. Above it the cliff, beetling until it all but touched the crest of the crag, gave no possible foothold. The wilderness of gorse and nettles was virgin, as far as Rex could determine, and the cliff, where the ramp met it, was flat and solid.

With the aid of the bushes, perilously enough, Rex had swung himself to the top of this bridge of verdure. Now to descend he floundered to the farther edge to discover, if he might, an easier way down. On this side the bushes seemed sparser: here and there the naked rock emerged. Indeed, about six feet down and below a narrow shelf, nubs of rock protruded here and there, giving a hold for the feet.

Rex let himself down to the shelf and there stopped short. A little pile of burnt matches lay on the ledge. His glance sped aloft to the curving cliff and thence to

the corrugated rock-floor of the beach below. The ramp's mantle of green was inviolate. In vain he scratched his hands, parting the brambles and peering into the undergrowth above the shelf: there was no sign of any entrance, nothing to corroborate the mystifying evidence of the blackened match-ends. Yet the matches were there to prove that someone had stood on that ledge in the dark; and it was plain to Rex, as he clambered down to the beach, that the bushes had been cleared so as to lay bare the rock and leave a foothold by which to gain the shelf.

Well, he thought, he had found the mouse-hole. Now, like the cat, he must sit down and wait for the mouse. He looked about him for a hiding-place. At the top of the beach a big boulder leaned against a shallow depression in the face of the cliff. Here the cliff ran slightly back so that the recess was higher up the shore than the ramp. Slipping behind the boulder, Rex found that, crouched down in the recess, he could command a diagonal view of the shelf. Since he would be behind anyone who stood on the ledge, there was little risk of his being seen.

It was now after five o'clock and he remembered that he had had no food since breakfast. He had not been willing to spare the time for lunch on his return to Saint-Jean-de-Luz, but had bought some rolls and chocolate at a pastry-cook's. Now he brought these out and began to eat. It was pleasant sitting in the shade of the boulder with the warm rock at his back and the steady hiss of the tide in his ears. The exertions of the morning had tired him out and when his meal was over, he presently dropped off to sleep.

When he awoke the sun had disappeared. There was

a cool breeze, and he was unpleasantly aware of the dankness of his shirt after the heat of the day. In his narrow field of vision the solitary crag, hard and black in the half-light, reared its tufted topknot to the darkening sky.

At the foot of the crag a man was standing.

CHAPTER XIX

THE HOT SHADOW DEEPENS

THERE was something eerie about this unexpected apparition in the stern and sullen solitude of the shore. The man stood motionless, his back to the ramp, his face, a mere blur of white in the gathering darkness, turned to the sea. A point of red glowed at his lips and Rex was aware of the peaty odour of a French cigarette. All about them the cliffs, high and dark, seemed to be watching.

Like all men who have lived much in the open, Rex had the gift of easy waking. He lay propped up against the rock as he had fallen asleep, and but for the glint of his eyes, watchful between their lashes, one would have said he slumbered still. Yet he was alert on the instant, fully aroused to the vital necessity of making no movement that should reveal his presence to the man below.

Excitement pricked his nerve centres like the tingle of a galvanic battery. At last he had recaptured the thrill of his campaigning days. Even thus, at the end of cold, blank hours of sentry in the vastness of Africa, the flash of a jellaba behind the dusty aloes of the zareeba had stung him into instant watchfulness.

And then from the direction of the sea mounted a soft and rhythmic tapping, at first no louder than the rattle of a typewriter, but swiftly swelling to a low and eager thrumming. The dark figure at the ramp stirred, then seemed to melt into the gloom at the base

of the crag. Now lower down the strand against the lighter background of the ocean a stocky silhouette was posed with that roundness at the top which is the outline of the Basque cap. The hammering to seaward deepened to a loud and hasty stutter and behind his boulder Rex knew that a motor-boat was approaching the shore.

He craned his neck round the rock. A long shape, like a white shadow, came foaming through the dark water. With noiseless feet the watcher on the shore began to move along the beach until the curve of the cliff cut him off from Rex's view. Then only, very softly and with poised movements, did the man behind the boulder scramble erect to listen.

After his weeks of patient waiting, the suspense of those minutes was all but unbearable. Bitterly he reproached himself for his negligence in falling asleep. Obviously, the man on the beach had descended from the house by the passage and the launch had come to take him off to the yacht. In a moment the throb of the engine would proclaim that the secret of the Pigeon House was still intact.

But no sound save the sad surge of the waves broke the pregnant silence. Rex wondered whether he might dare venture forth and spy out what was going forward beyond the bulge of the cliff. Every instant he expected to hear the loud flurry of propellers fend the leaden hush. And then, so close to his ear that he cowered down in panic behind his boulder, the sound of voices reached him.

Picking their way over the rocks at the top of the beach, two men passed within a dozen yards of where he crouched. The stolid figure in the Basque cap that

had waited at the ramp was one. In the open the last grey vestiges of daylight persisted and Rex recognised the Basque he had seen at the Pigeon House. Beside him plodded the fat and sallow Spaniard who had unloaded petrol alongside the Aurora that morning. The one carried a suitcase, the other a leather kitbag, and as they went they conversed in a sort of growling undertone. In the lee of the cliff they halted, apparently to rest; for Rex who did not dare look out, heard them puffing and blowing. Their acrid peasant smell, mingled with a searing blast of garlic, was warm in his nostrils. He caught the rasp of his native Basque and had a moment of thankful remembrance of the old lessons with Luis Larraga.

‘What a job!’ grunted a voice. ‘I shan’t be sorry when it’s over, my Pedro, although the money’s useful. This is the last trip, anyhow. You’re off any day now, aren’t you?’

‘Who knows?’ the grudging answer came back. ‘One never can tell with the master. I don’t care about this business in the dark. One of these nights the coast guards will spot the launch and...’

The other uttered a contemptuous ejaculation.

‘When was a Basque ever scared of a coast guard? Forward, my Pedro. In a little half an hour we shall be back at our supper...’

Rex heard the squeegee of their corded soles on the slippery rock. Then the voice that had just spoken said:

‘We’ll pack the bags and leave them at the entrance. Then we’ll carry the heavy box straight down and return for the...’

The remainder of the sentence was lost. Stealthily

Rex peered out from his observation post. The two men were mere shadows now in the blackness under the cliff. The watcher trembled with eagerness. Rather than let the secret of the passage elude him once more, he was determined, if needs be, to creep forth and follow those two dim shapes.

But they had halted before the ramp. The Basque was climbing up the shelf, his shirt a patch of lightness in the gloom. And then in the side of the ramp above the shelf, blacker than the dark verdure that clothed the buttress, a square hole gaped.

The Basque's round head showed in the opening. The Spaniard threw up the bags and mounted after. The next moment Rex found himself staring down at a black and empty window and all was silence once more.

He never knew how long he waited before the sound of heavy breathing, of stifled grunts and raucous whispering, heralded the return of the pair. To the Basque, who climbed down first and stood on the beach below the ledge, the other laboriously lowered a long, flat packing-case and descended after. Between them they hoisted the box on their shoulders and Rex heard the seaweed pop beneath their tread as they shuffled slowly down the shore.

Even as he resolutely emerged from his hiding-place, he knew that his intention was madly foolhardy. But the passage stood open before him, he had a few moments' grace while the men were down at the launch and he felt that such a chance might never come his way again. He brushed from his mind the obvious reflection that the other end of the passage would undoubtedly be closed. He had no belief in the secret catches and sliding panels of romantic fiction. Where

he could get in, he told himself, there he could also get out.

The contrivance for concealing the entrance to the passage was admirable in its simplicity. A shaft had been driven down into the ramp and the aperture closed by a heavy timber shutter over which brambles, to the depth of several feet, had been trained. The trap was hinged to a wooden framework and fastened on the inside by an iron spring which was released from without by pressing a spike or something of the sort into a round hole. When the shutter was closed, the hole was so completely hidden by the undergrowth that, Rex felt sure, unless one knew the device, one would never locate it. When he saw the shaft, Rex realised what had happened. The original exit of the old smugglers' passage on the beach must have been carried away in the fall of the cliff and the shaft had been driven down to pick up the passage where it emerged from the rock. The shaft, propped with tree-trunks like a mine gallery, dropped steeply for a dozen yards to a cave-like aperture, whence, he surmised, the passage mounted to the house.

It was dark at the bottom of the shaft, the air hot and smelling of wet earth. As Rex bowed his head to go in under the cave, he stumbled over something. He struck a match and saw at his feet the bags the men had brought.

He realised that he had, at the most, only a few minutes in which to explore the passage. At any moment, now, the men might reappear. Should they decide, for any reason, to go back to the house, only the narrowest margin of time would remain for him in which to reach the exit, discover the means of opening

it, if it were closed, and elude them. And he had nothing with which to light his way except a box of wooden matches.

Still, the chance was too good to forego. The bags, he doubted not, held the key to Inocencia's mysterious trip across the frontier. He dropped to his knees and with his thumbs felt for the sliding locks of the suitcase. Thank Heaven, it was not locked! He swung back the lid and struck a match.

The suitcase was crammed to the top with bank-notes!

They were Moroccan hundred-franc notes as he, the ex-légionnaire, instantly perceived, brand-new and still smelling of the printing-press, done up in tightly compressed packs fastened with bands of white paper. There must have been several million francs' worth of them there, for the suitcase was roomy and full to the edges. And the kitbag, which was even larger, though not completely filled, contained layer upon layer of the same paper money.

He lit another match and let his hand rest for an instant on the glossy surface of the packs. Here again was Africa bulking through the mist! This brace of banal valises held the real sinews of war, powerfulest of all arguments in Abd el Krim's jihad against the Spanish and the French. And then the notion of forgery fired his imagination. Was not since the war forged money the most effective weapon of subversive minorities? On a sudden impulse, he snatched up one of the packets of notes and stuffed it in his pocket. Then he shut the bags and restored them to their place. At the same moment, from the head of the shaft, he heard the scrape of feet upon the rock.

Without pausing to strike a light he plunged, blindly groping, into the funnel of pitchy darkness before him. His hand was on the roughness of the wall as a guide and a support in one; for his feet kept slipping on the loose floor, dislodging little spouts of rubble that pattered echoingly in his wake. Terrified lest the rattle should betray him, he soon came to a full stop, leaning against the rugged wall, the sweat streaming from his face, his heart thumping in his ears. The blackness was clammy, opaque, saturating: the atmosphere like a waft of air from a hot cupboard.

He listened and heard only the stealthy silence, as ponderous and stifling as that Stygian darkness. Then an invisible blow seemed to jar the air and he caught the echo of a hollow crash. That was the shutter closing: the men must have gone.

His spirits revived. He struck another match and looked about him. By the trembling yellow flame he saw an oval tunnel, as ragged as the track of a corkscrew in a cork, punched through the layers of friable rock, with a roof which became lower as the passage climbed. He counted six twists before, with a sudden freshening of the air, the tunnel opened into a low-pitched, oblong chamber, faced with stone and gleaming with damp, which might at one time have been a sunken cistern. His match showed a candle, stuck in a bottle on the ground, and against the wall, in an untidy heap, the boxes, empty now, which on the previous day, he had seen unloaded from Doña Inocencia's car.

Rex lit the candle and raised it above his head. Except for the cases, and some shavings scattered about

the slimy floor, the room was completely bare. But in the opposite wall was a small wooden door.

It was no higher than the door of a hayloft and innocent of lock or fastening save for a length of dirty rope slung between two hasps to form a grip. Rex tugged at the rope, but the door did not move. Candle in hand, he carefully examined the timber face and the walls on either side without discovering either bolt or catch. At last—for such is man's perversity in dealing with inanimate things—he did what he might have done at first and administered to the door a vigorous push. He felt it yield and, when he thrust again, it fell softly outwards and downwards. On the instant the candle flared and guttered and the night air was cold on his cheek. He blew out the light; and, as the darkness closed about him, a patch of slaty sky, livid behind the high, dark ridge of a gate, showed in the opening. He was looking out upon the green gates of the fronton.

Across the shutter as it lay on the ground he stepped, and stood upon the court. He found that the entrance to the passage was actually contrived in the playing-wall of the fronton, at the bottom of the wall and to one side, close to the right-hand wing. As he raised the trap, which was hinged at the base, to close it behind him, he noticed that the surface of the wood was faked to counterfeit the lichen-grey mottling of the surrounding stonework.

He did not stop to think, as his eager hands softly pressed the flap into place, that he was cutting off a sure way of retreat. But success had made him reckless and the utter silence of the old house, looming black above the empty expanse of the fronton, invited him to push

on with his voyage of discovery. He began to tiptoe across the court towards the tall, blank gates at the end.

A strange odour of spices scented the falling night. Rex halted and sniffed. He should know that piquant, greasy smell! It seemed to hang in his memory like a background to those African pictures which on summer nights like this, with the first stars throbbing in the immense vault of the sky, were so often projected on the screen of his memory. Blended with the reek of hot fat was the tang of an Eastern cookhouse, the aromatic bite of cumin, the sickly mustiness of saffron, the perfumed breath of orange-water. Once more the hot shadow of mysterious Africa fell across the track of this dark enterprise!

Hardly had the reflection come to him than from somewhere within the dusky pile of the Pigeon House a high, falsetto voice began to chant softly. It was not the fluty quaverings of Arab singing that brought the quick frown of perplexity to his features but the air, the words.

It was familiar to him, as it was to every légionnaire who had served in Southern Morocco, this common folksong of the tribesmen of the Sous, that vast, unexploited region which spreads its unplumbed richness on the southernmost confines of the Moorish Empire. He had heard it so often, a typical Chleu romance, which the nasal treble of boys intoned behind the plough or at the water-hole, at the dusty village markets in the torrid morning heat or before the great white gates of the kasbahs in the evening cool. The last time had been at Tiznit, remotest of French fortified towns in the South, where the endless caravans, swinging up from the Sahara, pass on their weary road to the distant shores

of the Atlantic. In the blinding white square between the crenellated battlements the chain gangs of prisoners had droned it as they worked on the parade ground, punctuating the song with the clank of their fetters and the dull thud of their rams...

Suddenly on a half-note the singing ended and the house slipped back into its stagnant hush. Rex drew into the shadow of the wall and waited. All about him the silence persisted. He strained his ears, but could catch no sound of movement either within the house or without. Keeping close to the wall, he began to edge very slowly towards the gate.

He had made up his mind to go through with the adventure to the end. Before he returned to Saint-Jean-de-Luz he was determined to get a sight of this unseen individual who used Arab food and sang the songs of the Berbers. The gates of the fronton, as he expected to find them, were locked, and, after satisfying himself that all was still in the outer yard, he drew himself up to the top of the gate and dropped to the ground on the other side.

The gravel spluttered beneath his feet as he stepped out of the shadow. The front of the house was in darkness: therefore the singer, presumably, was in one of the upper rooms on the side of the sea. Rex had an impression, clear as an etching, of the old, carved staircase mounting aloft from a corner of the kitchen as though it beckoned. Dare he enter the house? His Browning, treasured trophy of the battle-field of Gaza, was heavy in his hip pocket; but the time for firearms was not yet. As he stood there, considering this vital question of the next step, a gentle throbbing seemed to stroke the warm evening air and he knew that a motor-

car was close by. Then a voice crying for Catarina smashed into the silence and there came a vigorous pounding on the entrance gate.

What the interruption portended, he had no idea, nor did he linger to find out. In an instant he was back by the way he had come, crouching in the shadow behind the fronton doors listening to the murmur of voices, the scraping of feet, in the yard outside. Fearing lest they might as before garage the car on the fronton, he began to creep across the court towards the entrance to the passage, hugging the wall. He felt disarmed, non-plussed, as though he had left eyes and ears and heart behind to see what this unexpected intrusion betokened.

Now he was at the playing-wall. The last of the light had gone and the court was plunged in obscurity. He dared not strike a match. With a chilling sensation of dismay it dawned upon him that he had no means of identifying the entrance to the passage. Feverishly, he began to grope over the age-roughened surface of the stone. What a thoughtless fool he had been not to mark the panel or, at least, to note the device for pulling it down!

His frantic fingers were still blindly exploring the blank surface of the wall when, without warning, the flap fell forward at his very feet. In the aperture a thickset figure in a Basque cap was outlined against the glow of yellow light. Rex staggered back to save his toes and the next moment was thrown off his balance and borne to the ground. The reek of garlic nearly stifled him, but before he could shake off the malodorous embrace another solid body flung itself across his legs and pinned him securely down. In his very ear, it seemed, he heard the hoarse whisper in Basque,

‘If he moves, my Pedro, give him the knife!’ and a sharp point was pressed against his ribs.

Even as he ceased to struggle, a voice, smoothly snarling, spoke in French from the rear.

‘Stand aside, you two,’ it said, ‘and let the English Señor rise!’

Clumsily the two men released him. Scrambling to his feet, Rex found himself confronted by Don Leandro.

CHAPTER XX

REX PLAYS HIS TRUMP

THEY had kindled a light in the kitchen now, and from the shallow window in the wall of the house a band of feeble radiance fell across the old man's bloodless features. The ample cloak he wore descended in an unbroken line to the ground, covering up his hands, so that his outline was vague against the background of the night and the livid face seemed to peer out of the gloom as though hovering sundered from its body.

Panting and smeared with dust, Rex was restless under Don Leandro's baleful and impenetrable regard. He knew himself to have failed in the most searching test of strategy, the exploitation of an initial success; but at all costs he was resolved not to let the initiative escape from his grasp. Things had fallen out altogether differently from his plan — for that he blamed his own recklessness. He had so definitely intended to gather up, unknown to Inocencia, all the threads of the conspiracy and then, when the enterprise was ripe, in his own good time, to denounce her to the authorities.

But his overconfidence had precipitated a crisis. He had played a lone hand too long and events had out-run him. That detective fellow — what was his name? Barbot, Barbiche? something like that — whom he had repelled in the ghastly dawn beside the guillotine, would have been mighty useful now. He wished he could have taken him into his confidence. But that would have meant disclosing the motive of Pedro Gomez's

crime and with it the real identity of his dead friend...

Well, he would have to make the best of a bad job. One thing was crystal clear. Depending wholly as he did on his own resources, he must retain his liberty of action. Let but the merest trickle of suspicion seep into Doña Inocencia's mind and his usefulness was at an end. At any price, and at once, he must forestall this contingency, even if he had to sacrifice his only trump.

He could not afford to be searched. A search would inevitably reveal the packet of bank-notes in his jacket pocket, not only compromising him beyond repair in Inocencia's eyes, but depriving him of his only piece of capital evidence.

He would have to play his trump...

On this resolve, as he stood and faced the sinister old man, he boldly broke the silence.

'I've come to report,' he announced.

His spirits rose to see how, at his words, for one fleeting second, the stony mask was lifted and the basilisk eyes quickened into life. He perceived that he had startled Don Leandro; and his courage came back.

The old man's face was impassive now and his lips were pressed together in a sneering, sardonic line.

'Report?' he repeated, in precise and toneless English.

'You break into a private house and then say you've come to report. Report what? And to whom?'

'To those who await my coming!'

Beneath their covering the sloping shoulders outlined a shrug.

'I wish to know what you're doing here. And what you want!'

Rex laughed. 'Come, now,' he said, 'surely my presence explains itself?'

Very deliberately Don Leandro stepped up to him. Though his voluminous mantle gave him the mutilated appearance of an armless man, there was menace in the movement, like a hand upraised to strike.

'In France,' he rasped, 'it's a serious matter to break into private property by night. My men would have been justified in shooting you, do you realise that?' The other's easy smile brought a scowl of anger to the old man's face. You'd find it less amusing if I were to hand you over to the police...'

'The threat does not impress me,' Rex retorted lightly. He paused. 'As you should know...'

A light step sounded on the court and Inocencia stepped into the pool of yellow light beneath the window. She did not seem to notice Rex at first, as he stood in the shadow between the two servants, but went straight up to Don Leandro and seized him by the arm. Her face was ashen.

'Hertz has come in,' she said in a harsh and hurried voice. 'He says...'

A parchment hand shot out from beneath the cloak and stayed her. She turned slowly and saw Rex. 'You!' she exclaimed, and anger leaped up in her eyes like a flame in the window of a burning house. She swung round to Don Leandro. 'What's he doing here?' she demanded furiously. 'Who let him in?'

The old man shrugged his shoulders. 'Jean and Pedro caught him prowling about the fronton just now,' he answered with elaborate politeness. 'As you had not warned them that you expected Mr. Garrett to call and they did not recognise him in the dark, they knocked

him down and held him until I appeared on the scene. I trust they were not acting against your wishes?’

His sarcasm seemed to fan her wrath. With an angry exclamation she rounded on Rex.

‘How dare you follow me here?’ she cried. ‘You presume on my friendship too far, Mr. Garrett!’

‘We can drop that name now, Doña Inocencia,’ he told her quietly.

He thrilled to see how the retort startled her. Brusquely, as one sends a dog to heel, she motioned the two servants away. When they were out of earshot, she said sharply, ‘Explain...!’

‘You were expecting two visitors, I believe. Well, one of them has arrived...’

Her eyes were suddenly watchful. ‘What do you mean?’ she asked huskily.

‘I mean that I’m Gil Forsan,’ he answered firmly.

For a moment he thought that she was going to faint. The blood drained away from her face until it was as grey as the floor of the court gleaming palely in the dark. She stared at Rex with incredulous eyes.

‘And the other, then?’ she asked with an effort.

‘Dead,’ he replied.

‘Ah!’

Don Leandro’s non-committal ejaculation was like a full stop at the end of a sentence.

‘How did it happen?’ he said.

‘Klau was killed in a listening-post on the Ouergha front the night we were going to desert to the enemy...’

‘A moment!’ The old man held up his hand. ‘When was this?’

‘Last March. A few days after Klau received the letter from Doña Inocencia with the money...’

‘March! And this is July!’

Rex hesitated. He would have to go warily: the path was full of pitfalls.

‘The Rifis kept me prisoner,’ he improvised.

‘The case was foreseen,’ Don Leandro retorted, holding him with his fishy eye. ‘Klau was fully informed...’

‘He told me nothing,’ Rex averred stoutly. ‘He showed me the money, five thousand francs, which was to take us both to France. If I cared to go over with him, he said, there would be a well-paid job at the end. He told me no more than that!’

The girl’s imperious contralto broke in upon their dialogue. ‘Why didn’t you report sooner?’

Rex had foreseen the question and was ready for it. ‘Because,’ he answered glibly, ‘I wanted to see for myself what I was letting myself in for. You seemed to be in no hurry to start, although I arrived on time, two clear days before the appointed date. I waited until things began to move in order to be able to investigate. That’s why I am here to-night...’

Don Leandro’s grating tones cut in.

‘I suppose you’re quite sure that your name is Forsan,’ he remarked bitingly. ‘You see, Forsan is a Basque. But you...’—his steely glance rested insolently on Rex’s face—‘are an Englishman, I believe!’

Out of the tail of his eye, as he squarely met the other’s challenging scrutiny, Rex saw Inocencia’s face swiftly change. Her mouth, again, was ugly with doubt.

‘Not by birth,’ the young man retorted cheerfully. ‘I was born a Basque!’

‘Then you speak the Eskuara?’ The girl’s question rang out like a pistol-shot.

‘Not so well as I did,’ was the imperturbable reply. ‘In twenty years one is apt to forget a language, you know. But I can still manage to make myself understood.’

‘Jean,’ Inocencia called across the court, ‘come here! I want you.’ In a breathless hush the Basque slouched over to the group. He doffed his bonnet to Inocencia, then remained silent, twirling it round in his fingers and looking about him suspiciously. ‘Jean shall judge,’ said the girl.

‘By all means,’ Rex rejoined. He made a smiling remark to the Basque. At once the man’s features lit up and, on a further jesting observation, relaxed into a slow and delighted grin.

‘Well,’ said Inocencia impatiently, ‘what about it? Do you understand him?’

‘For sure I understand him,’ was the gruff reply. ‘I wouldn’t be a Basque if I couldn’t!’

‘Then tell us what he said! And remember that Don Leandro here knows more Basque than you suppose...’

Jean wagged his round head roguishly. ‘He says Catarina was sharper than you. He says she knew him for a Basque at once...’

‘Is that all?’

The man exchanged a comic glance with Rex. ‘He says Catarina is not so stupid as some people he knows...’

Inocencia’s gurgling laugh broke the tension. Rex had a moment of almost unendurable relief. But then Don Leandro returned to the charge.

‘I am asking myself,’ he said, ‘what you are doing in this business. You seem to have plenty of money. What is your motive?’

'The motive which led me to join the Legion,' was the prompt reply, 'the love of adventure...'

'You have, of course, your military papers?'

Rex laughed. 'You're bent on discrediting me, I see,' he answered good-humouredly. 'I should have thought any intelligent person would know that the first thing a deserter does is to get rid of his pay-book...'

He made no attempt to soften the rebuke. He was exultant now, confident that his trump had made the odd trick. The most pressing danger was averted. And the look on Inocencia's face was encouraging. She was contemplating him with a serene, if rather a whimsical air.

'However,' Rex continued, addressing the old man, 'since you are so persistent, I believe I can convince you of my bona fides...'

So saying he pushed up his sleeve to the elbow and, baring his forearm, held it up so that the light fell on it. Tattooed beneath two crossed flags was something resembling a pineapple inscribed 'I L.E.'

"'Premier Légion Etrangère,' that stands for," he said, 'or, in other words, the First Regiment of the Foreign Legion.' He laid his finger on the dull blue symbol. 'And here's the Legion's badge, the flaming grenade!' He pulled down his sleeve and faced his inquisitors. 'Well,' he demanded, 'are you satisfied?'

Feet pattered suddenly behind the trio and brought them to the right about. Jean was there. He looked scared. 'Hertz is back!' he gasped, jerking his thumb behind him.

'See what it is, will you, Leandro?' said Inocencia.

The old man gathered his cloak about him and faded into the gloom. Inocencia turned to Rex.

‘Do you realise that you were followed here to-night?’ she said abruptly.

His surprise was genuine. ‘That’s impossible,’ he told her.

‘Why do you say that?’

He had meant to keep the knowledge of the passage to himself. But he realised he must discover what this fresh development denoted so he answered: ‘Because I came by the beach...’

‘By the beach?’

‘Yes. And up by the passage...’

Her face softened. ‘You’re a very astonishing person, do you know, Riccy!’ she said. ‘How on earth did you find the entrance?’

‘I fell asleep on the beach and woke up in time to see Jean and that other fellow of yours bringing some boxes out. I just nipped in when they weren’t looking. What makes you think I was followed?’

‘Have you any reason for thinking that the French police are on your track?’ she asked, ignoring his question.

The dark eyes seemed to probe his very soul. He had to make an effort to fight down his growing uneasiness.

‘No,’ he answered, trying to appear indifferent. ‘Why?’

‘Because a Paris detective recently arrived at Saint-Jean-de-Luz, a man called Barbier, one of the Anarchist squad...’

Barbier! The man who had accosted him beside the guillotine. That was the name! And he was at Saint-Jean-de-Luz! Here was undreamed-of help at hand. No need now to disclose Luis Larraga’s secret: a little

patience and the detective should have in his hands evidence so complete and overwhelming that he would act forthwith. But what was Barbier doing at Saint-Jean-de-Luz?

‘Hertz, who is one of our people,’ Inocencia was saying, ‘knows this Barbier by sight and recognised him at the station the other day. The miserable idiot let him slip through his fingers and we’ve seen nothing of him since. But Hertz has remained on the lookout; and to-night he discovered a man on the cliff watching the house.’

‘Barbier?’

‘Hertz couldn’t see his face. I sent him off to find out what became of the man...’

There was a step behind them. Don Leandro had crept up. Anger blotched his face and his eyes had a savage glint.

‘Barbier!’ he rasped.

‘Ah,’ said Inocencia quietly. ‘I thought it might be...’

‘But that’s not the worst. One of his people gained admission to the house to-night...’

Inocencia’s eyes flashed a suspicious glance at Rex. His heart seemed to miss a beat.

‘Here?’ said Inocencia in surprise. ‘To-night? Who?’

‘That slut of a dressmaker...’

‘What proof have you of this?’

‘Hertz saw him join her as soon as they were clear of the house. They had a long talk together down by the fort. Hertz was unable to follow them, as they went off in a car together.’

She gave a disdainful laugh. ‘This puts a different complexion on it. Even detectives are human, I

imagine. Probably the girl's his sweetheart, and he came up after her to see her home in the dark.' She smiled comically at Rex. 'The Policeman's Idyll, or Love on the Cliffs!'

'I see nothing to make a joke about,' commented the old man sourly.

'Bah!' said the girl. 'Barbier's been in the town for a week or more. Why has he never been near the house before? And how could he possibly have known that I telephoned to Valia's from Biarritz to send me up that frock to-night?'

'It doesn't strike you as curious, I suppose,' Don Leandro retorted, 'that Barbier should be hanging round the house on the very night of the arrival of our friend here.'

'It did until I discovered that Riccy came up by the passage...'

'By the passage!' exclaimed the old man, aghast.

She laughed. 'He was one too many for us there, Leandro!'

'I find the coincidence curious all the same,' he rejoined meaningly.

There was an ominous gleam in her eye as she confronted him. 'I accept Forsan,' she said.

'You would,' he exclaimed bitterly.

'Are you trying to be offensive, Leandro?' she asked quietly.

'I'm trying to warn you against your growing recklessness,' he burst out furiously. 'You're getting slack. You never used to take risks. I've warned you already about the danger of letting strangers come here. Hitherto I've never interfered with your private life, but...'

'Be careful of what you say!' she warned him.

'How can I be careful,' he threw back at her, chattering like an angry ape, 'when I see things going wrong simply because you're infatuated with...'

'You've said enough, do you hear me?' she broke in wrathfully. She paused as though to master herself, then added more calmly: 'What I undertake doesn't go wrong, Leandro. Caution is one thing; panic is another. The best way to keep a secret is to avoid giving the impression of having anything to conceal. Riccy here understands that better than you. Have I ever failed in anything to which I put my hand? You know I haven't. Then why start prophesying disaster? Things are shaping splendidly. The last of the stuff was embarked to-night and Hossein goes on board before morning. Klau is a loss, I admit, but now that Forsan is here you can sail as soon as our plans are definitely laid. Don't worry about Barbier. If he'd searched the house to-night, it might have been awkward. But he didn't: therefore, if he really does suspect anything, he's still in the dark. I'll soon find out from this girl of Valia's whether he means mischief.' She glanced at her wrist. 'A quarter to eleven. The others will be here at eleven for the meeting, won't they?' He nodded. 'They're leaving the launch at the port and coming out by the cliff. I thought it would be safer...'

'You'd better see whether Hossein is ready, hadn't you?'

Don Leandro humped up his shoulders as though he were casting off a burden. Then he looked at Rex. 'What about him? Is he staying here or on the yacht?'

'He can spend the night here,' she answered. 'You'll have to fit him out. Jean can fetch his luggage in the

morning.' She tapped with her foot impatiently. 'Well, what are you waiting for?'

Don Leandro hesitated, then turned on his heel and, calling to the servants, left the court.

Night, heavy with the promise of rain, pressed sullenly upon the old fronton. The rare stars seemed to be weeping as they peered mistily through threadbare patches in the low and swollen clouds. The wind was getting up and in the darkness they could hear the sand dancing madly. From time to time a shower of mortar rattled down from the crumbling wall and once a stone thudded to the ground. Far below on the beach the waves pounded with hollow, ominous roar.

A white hand was laid shyly on the lapel of Rex's coat. 'Now I know,' Inocencia whispered, 'what you meant by saying you couldn't love me if there were secrets between us. Only to-night, when I found out who you really were, did I realise what thousands of miles separated us before. Why did you wait so long to reveal yourself? If you only knew how anxiously we were expecting you...'

Once more she was the Inocencia of their hours of idleness, cajoling and soft where before she had been domineering and harsh. Her mobile face, changing to every mood, under the raven's-wing hair, was touched by a sort of serene rapture, and her eyes, wistfully appealing, were trustful like those of a little child.

Warned by experience, he steeled himself against her charm. He would have to encourage her in this mood; for she was likely to be his strongest champion against the suspicions of Don Leandro and those others of whom she had spoken. But he must keep his head. There was this meeting in prospect. Would the long-

expected Gil Forsan be admitted to the council of the conspirators? He thought so, and knew he must lose no time in finding out more about Forsan and his rôle in this affair...

'Perhaps I wanted to see what sort of woman Doña Inocencia would prove to be,' he answered.

'But who told you of my existence?'

'Klau...'

'Of course. I'd forgotten.'

'He remembered better than you, Inocencia. He used to carry your photograph about with him.'

'Then he must have stolen it...'

'He bragged of having been your lover...'

She gasped. '*That* German boor! It was Klau who first taught me how vile men can be. You believe me, Riccy, when I tell you that he lied?'

'The first time I laid eyes on you I was sure of it.'

Her eyes thanked him. 'I'm twenty-seven years old,' she said in a low voice, 'and I've never given myself to a man. Will you remember that, Riccy?' She laughed shyly. 'But let's talk about you! How do you come to be a Basque as well as an Englishman?'

'An old story, my dear,' said he, 'and not very interesting...'

She patted his hand. 'Never mind, then. Basque or British, you're very nice as you are. The only thing that matters to me is that we're in this together...'

'But farther apart than ever,' he jested. 'I'm only the humble employee. You're the boss!'

Wearily she shook her head. 'If you only knew how tired I am of leading! There are two women in me, I often think, one that leads and one that wants to be led. If I'm the boss, as you call it, it's only because

I've got more drive, more initiative, because I see things more clearly, than Leandro and the rest of them. I never sought to be the head. On the contrary, I want someone to lean on, someone who'll let me be my own, real self...'

With a little fluttering sigh she laid her face against his coat. Like a sleepy child she rested on his breast, her silky hair brushing his cheek. He gazed down at the dark head, fighting down the impulse to take her in his arms. But the dim shadow of the man whose personality he had usurped had taken possession of his mind, and the recollection of the meeting, for which he was all unprepared, helped to steady him.

'Then you must give me your confidence,' he said.

She looked up hurt. 'Didn't I give you my confidence to-night? Leandro is not satisfied, you know. And I may have trouble with the others...'

'I only meant that I know nothing, not even why you've sent for me...'

'Oh, that!' She nestled to him again. 'You'll hear all about it at the meeting. Put your arms round me, Riccy, and shut out the world until we have to go!'

He dared not question further. His only consolation was the discovery that Forsan was not supposed to know the part he had to play. But he wondered desperately what special qualifications this Basque deserter possessed. Mechanically, he put his arms about her. He no longer distrusted himself. Fear of the unknown future excluded every other thought from his mind.

A gust of wind more violent than the rest raised the sand in clouds that stung their faces like rain. The gates swayed and creaked and the mouldering wall spilled a spout of rubble. A stone flopped down with

a crash. Out of the turbulent darkness a voice called: 'Madame! Madame!'

A lamp flared in the wind at the gate. Inocencia slipped out of Rex's arms. Old Catarina, a shawl thrown over her head, came hobbling across the court.

'Tst, tst, tst,' she scolded, 'is this a night to be out of doors with the bad weather coming? Ay!' She shrank back as a lump of mortar dropped at her feet. 'How the wind tugs at the wall! The old fronton is falling to pieces like everything else at Usotegia...' She held her lamp on high to light them. 'Don Leandro asks for Madame. These gentlemen are waiting...'

To Rex it seemed as though an icy hand was laid on his heart.

'Come!' said Inocencia.

They followed the old woman into the house.

CHAPTER XXI

THE MASTER OF THE HOUR

THE wind caught the kitchen door and slammed it to behind them with a noise like a thunder-clap. Long shadows leaped up the whitewashed walls as the vibration set aswing the oil lamp suspended from the rafters.

Don Leandro was pacing up and down the flagged floor.

‘You must be mad to keep them waiting like this,’ he exclaimed angrily to Inocencia when she and her companion appeared. ‘They’re in no mood to be trifled with to-night.’ He dropped his voice and his hoarse whisper rustled through the quiet room. By discretion Rex affected to stand aloof; but he caught a word or two. ‘They intend to decide about him themselves!’ he heard Leandro say.

The girl flushed up. ‘We shall see about that!’ she promised darkly. ‘What about Hossein?’ she rapped out.

‘He’s had his supper and said his evening prayer. He’s upstairs in his room ready to come down when you want him...’

‘Then we’ll join the others, shall we?’

The old man hesitated.

‘You’re never going to take *him* to the meeting?’

‘I certainly am...’

‘Listen,’ he said impressively, ‘they’re in an ugly temper. There’ll be an outbreak if you do, mutiny, whatever you like to call it. Grolle is raging and Stein means trouble, too. Leave him here, Inocencia! Jean

and Pedro can look after him until we know what the others decide...'

As he spoke he flashed an anxious glance across the kitchen. Following the direction of his eyes, Rex saw that the two servants were behind them, guarding the door. They had pistols in their hands.

Trembling with rage, Inocencia seemed unconscious of anything save of that frail-looking figure barring her path.

'It's time some of you learnt who's master here,' she declared furiously. 'I'll deal with them, Leandro, and then I'll deal with you. I'll teach you to make mischief behind my back...'

'I've made no mischief,' he protested; 'I've only told them what they've the right to know...'

'Get out of my way!' Contemptuously she flung the order at him, and Leandro stood aside. Rex's heart went cold within him as he saw the old man's face.

Outside the wind was rising to a gale. They heard it shrieking round the house as they climbed the oaken stair. Somewhere in the upper regions a shutter banged dismally.

On the first floor a corridor ran to right and left. A door faced the staircase. From behind it came the hubbub of angry voices, the aroma of cigars. Inocencia without hesitation went to the door and flung it open. On the instant the clamour was stilled. In the ominous silence that ensued Rex heard her clear contralto announce:

'My friends, I present to you the Key Man!'

Through swathes of tobacco smoke drifting blue in the air he saw the room ripple into life. Chairs scraped noisily on bare boards and faces peered curiously out

of the haze. The room seemed to be full of people. Lurking vaguely in the background were the furnishings of an old-fashioned bedchamber; an immense double bed, with side curtains after the ancient manner, pushed back against the wall, a battered mahogany washstand with marble top as solid as a tombstone, an alabaster clock, which, with hands immutable pointing to a quarter to three, appeared to have died in its sleep on the dusty mantelpiece. The furniture had been cleared away from the centre of the uncarpeted floor, where a number of chairs, of different styles and in various stages of decay, huddled miserably together like beggars at a church door. The room was frowsy with neglect and reeking of dry rot, stuffy, too, for the windows were closed and shuttered.

Set in a chandelier hanging from the ceiling a paraffin lamp spilled a ring of light on a strangely assorted gallery of types. In the forefront of the picture, puffing at a long-stemmed German pipe, was the tawny individual Rex had seen that morning at the rail of the Aurora. His companions — Rex counted seven of them — varied greatly, in racial appearance as in social grade. He noticed a giant of Frisian blondness; an unmistakable Jew; a man with the mauvish complexion and dank hair of a Levantine; and another whose slit eyes and broad nose hinted at a Kalmuck strain. An eyeglass, wooden features, and a certain body stiffness suggested the German officer in one who was dapper in blue serge; several wore seamen's jerseys; and there was a fat man, with a drink-inflamed countenance, whom pince-nez and an alpaca coat endued with a vaguely academic air.

Varied as the gathering was, in physiognomy as in

dress, there was one characteristic common to every face, a sort of hard-bitten, challenging look, which the ex-private of the Legion had no difficulty in placing. For five years on end he had lived with it. It was the hallmark of the adventurer.

The atmosphere of the room was markedly hostile. Rex felt irritation and suspicion coming at them in waves. The company was silent, waiting; and in the stillness Rex heard the door swing to behind him, the blustering of the wind on the cliff outside, and the crash of the sea on the shore. The sound of the door shutting gave him a feeling of doom. What on earth was Forsan's rôle in this dark business? And why did they call him the Key Man?

With consummate ease Inocencia took charge of the situation. The baleful hush, the black looks, did not shake her composure.

'Voilà,' she remarked pleasantly, her hand on Rex's shoulder; 'this is our comrade, Gil Forsan, whom we've all been expecting so anxiously. Now wait a minute, Grolle' — she addressed the man in the alpaca coat who was simmering like a kettle on the boil — 'Forsan must be introduced.'

She turned from Rex to the other. 'Professor Grolle,' she announced, 'an eminent Orientalist, who knows Arabic as I know Spanish. He has only one defect: he has no opinion of women's brains...'

Her jest withered in their brooding silence. Rex marvelled to see how she dominated that evil-looking crew. Their sullen muteness was, he knew, a protest against his presence; but as yet none dared voice it in words.

'This,' said Inocencia, indicating the pipe-smoker,

‘is Captain Hartmeyer, who, during the war, with Lieutenant Schlösser here’ — the man with the eyeglass bowed stiffly — ‘and Heinrich, I don’t know his other name’ — she looked towards the flaxen Hercules — ‘landed arms and ammunition from a German submarine for El Hiba...’ She smiled at Rex. ‘But I needn’t tell you anything about that!’

El Hiba, the pretender of the Sous! Southern Morocco yet echoed with the exploits of the ragged adventurer who, in pre-war years, in the twilight of Moorish independence, came out of the Sahara to proclaim himself Sultan at Tiznit and to make a triumphant entry into Marrakesh. The Germans who, with their eye on Agadir and the fabled riches of the Sous, its hinterland, were generally believed to have financed him, supported him until his overthrow at the height of the Great War. These facts were common property. But what was Forsan supposed to know in particular about El Hiba?

‘Dr. Stein,’ Inocencia had resumed, with a gesture of the hand in the direction of a wiry-looking man who was smoking a cigar. ‘He spent several years before the war prospecting in the Sous and knows the country thoroughly.’

Stein favoured Rex with a long and searching stare. He had a pair of hard blue eyes set in a deeply sun-burned face. He did not remove his cigar.

‘Diacono and Voinik,’ said the girl, pointing to the Levantine and the Kalmuck, ‘who have been with Abdel Krim: our Russian friend was in the mutiny of the Black Sea Fleet, and Hertz’ — this was the Jew — ‘of whom we were speaking to-night. ‘And now,’ she added, glancing round the circle, ‘since our numbers

are complete, it only remains for Don Leandro to introduce...'

'Wait!' cried an angry voice. Professor Grolle sprang forward, red and irascible. 'Before we do anything further,' he said loudly, 'I want to know why this gentleman has seen fit to waste six precious weeks before reporting...' He spoke in French with an accent that was like the rattling of cutlery in a basket.

There was an assenting murmur from the room.

'That's easily explained,' Inocencia was beginning to answer, when Hartmeyer stopped her.

'He's got a tongue, hasn't he?' he growled. 'Let him speak for himself!'

Rex took a firm grip of his nerves.

'As I've told Doña Inocencia already,' he said, 'I wanted to find out what I was letting myself in for. Klau, the man who engaged me, didn't inform me of the nature of the scheme. Even now I'm completely in the dark...'

Grolle threw a suspicious glance at Inocencia.

'*You* called him the Key Man,' he declared, 'the man upon whom success depended. Nothing could be done until he arrived, you told us. We must be patient, cooped up for weeks in that damned tub of Leandro's at sea or here, under the noses of the coast guards. And now that he has turned up at last, he doesn't know what he's here for. What qualifications *has* he got, Donnerwetter?'

Inocencia smiled calmly and glanced at Rex.

'Forsan was with El Hiba all through his last rising,' she replied delicately.

Rex felt his scalp contract and the gooseflesh crisp on his body. His heart throbbed in his ears and his

hands were clammy. He was in for it now! Exposure loomed up black before his eyes. He could see the Kal-muck staring at him through the smoke-drift, a ferocious Mongol face, jaundiced and sensual, with thick, scarlet lips, fleshing strong, discoloured teeth. In that lonely old house, with the hungry sea close at hand—Lord, how the waves pounded!—the gang would show no mercy. He might steel himself to meet death bravely; but death meant defeat, and the failure of his mission...

In a flash his thoughts went to the packet of notes. Under cover of the curving arm of the ragged tapestry chair in which he sat, he slipped his hand into his pocket and drew forth the wad. Very softly he thrust it down into the space between the back and the seat of the chair.

‘...until the rebellion was finally crushed by the Glaoui, Pasha of Marrakesh,’ Inocencia was saying. ‘Date: April, 1917,’ she wound up whimsically.

‘So?’ was Grolle’s guttural comment. He glanced enquiringly at Stein, who, cigar in mouth, sprawled in his chair. But Stein remained silent.

‘It was essential to have a man, a European,’ the girl went on, warming to her theme, ‘who knows the tribes and is personally acquainted with their chiefs. In Forsan you have this man. He is personally guaranteed by Klau, whom you, Grolle, and you, Hartmeyer, knew...’

‘Possibly,’ Hartmeyer interjected in his rumbling bass, ‘but Klau is not here...’

A reedy, petulant voice piped up from a corner. It was Schlösser, Hartmeyer’s lieutenant. ‘No man is indispensable,’ he affirmed, ‘and I should like to know

exactly in what way this gentleman's special knowledge is superior to Stein's or Grolle's...'

'That's easily answered,' Inocencia rejoined. 'If Hossein is to work through El Hiba's channels, it is imperative that there should be someone in his entourage who is personally acquainted with them. The essence of our scheme is that Hossein should be merely the figurehead, directed by you three men. You, Stein, will be fully occupied with the military side of the rising, and you, Grolle, with propaganda. Forsan will accompany Hossein in his tour of the tribes, as your eyes and ears and mouthpiece...'

'Yes, yes,' Grolle broke in testily, 'but what proof is there that he knows El Hiba's people? Did you ever meet him when you were in the Sous, Hartmeyer?'

'No!' was the blunt answer.

'Did you ever hear of him out there?'

'Europeans were said to be with El Hiba,' replied Hartmeyer grudgingly, 'but I never heard of Forsan!'

Grolle's eyes twinkled maliciously out of his plump and glowing face as, with a knowing glance at his companions, he turned to Rex. That glance put Rex on his guard and he suspected a trap. But when the question came, fired pointblank at him, he breathed again.

'Do you know the river Massa?' the German demanded.

Here, at least, was a question he could answer.

'Of course,' he replied, with as much assurance as he could muster. Had he not camped beside it for a month, when they were repairing the rough track that serves as the main road from Agadir to Tiznit? Not a river in the European sense, of course; merely a stony

bed, laid in the flat plain, with a rushing torrent in the centre; for it was January and the rainy season when they bivouacked by the stream. A picturesque camp it was, he remembered, beside the ford with the clear mountain water rushing over the stones. The caravans coming up from the torrid South used to water their camels there. He recalled a snow-white camel he had watched one day resting among the oleanders, bright with pink flowers, a pretty picture. Oleanders meant malaria, the old légionnaires had warned him...

Grolle's throaty accents broke in upon his meditations.

'What is the legend about the river?' the German asked.

Rex did not reply for a moment. Something was stirring faintly in the back of his memory, some tale he had heard round their fire of gnarled arganier roots beside the river crossing in the endless dark nights of that January of long ago. He snatched at the recollection, missed it, caught it again, and, oh, triumph! this time held it.

'Every Soussi believes,' he rejoined, 'in the gold mine which is said to be buried under enormous rocks on the banks of the Massa. It is there that one day, the legend says, a great prophet, the Master of the Hour, will arise. The Sous specialises in mad mullahs, you know. The trouble-makers in Moroccan history have always come from the South...'

His words produced an obvious impression on his hearers. He thought he detected marks of approval in the silent glances they exchanged. Inocencia was looking at him with shining eyes. He was beginning to wonder whether his ordeal was at an end for the moment

when a curt question from Stein sent his hopes down to zero.

‘What about the Shereef of Tazeroualt?’ he asked. ‘What will be his attitude towards a rising?’

Rex realised that he was cornered now. He had never heard of Tazeroualt; yet he was fully aware that its Shereef must be a local personage of importance. For Stein, with his keen eye and lean, bright face, had a damnably competent look about him, and he spoke with an air of authority which, Rex felt it in his bones, was based on knowledge.

‘You must have met the gentleman I mean,’ Stein went on, ‘the head of the . . .’ — he snapped his fingers — ‘what’s the name of the tribe again?’

The perspiration broke out on Rex’s forehead. Against this industrious, well-stocked German brain no vague evasion, he knew, would save him. If he confessed ignorance he was lost, he was sure; and if he blundered, the result would be worse. If only he could put up a bluff! But he could think of nothing . . .

It was Heinrich, the burly German seaman, who came to his rescue.

‘Herr Gott!’ he bawled stentorically, ‘are we going to sit up all night listening to this drivel? We’ve come here to see Leandro’s nigger, not to gas about a lot of lousy tribes. If you think Forsan’s a spy, we can soon shut his mouth. Bring out your prophet, Leandro, and let’s have a look at him!’

Inocencia made a sign to Don Leandro, who quietly slipped away.

Grolle was speaking to Stein: ‘Hossein was with his father all through the rising,’ he said; ‘he must know Forsan. If Hossein identifies him, that’s good enough . . .’

Stein drew a thoughtful puff from his cigar and made no reply.

The door opened and Leandro appeared. With him was a dignified figure in a flowing white burnous, the hood of which was cast over the head. From beneath the cowl hot black eyes peered suspiciously out of a brown face edged with a straggling black beard.

‘Hossein Ou Moha, son of El Hiba,’ Leandro announced, and with a stately salaam the native entered the room.

Grolle bounced up to him at once and burst into a flood of guttural Arabic, at the same time pointing to Rex. Then a strange thing happened. Hossein, with a grave smile, advanced to Rex, and, after touching forehead, mouth, and heart, in the Oriental fashion, held out his hand. Grolle swung round to Inocencia.

‘Hossein says he remembers Forsan perfectly at El Hiba’s headquarters!’

‘Good,’ the girl replied. ‘We’ve wasted far too much time over this matter as it is.’ She raised her voice. ‘If you will all sit down,’ she suggested, ‘Grolle will explain our plans in detail to Hossein and translate to us what Hossein has to say...’

Then Stein stepped up to her.

‘Not while your friend Forsan is here,’ he said.

‘This is past bearing,’ the girl exclaimed angrily. ‘Hossein has identified Forsan and that satisfies me...’

‘But not me,’ Stein snapped back. His voice rang out like a clarion in the tense hush of the room. ‘Here, Heinrich, or one of you, search him...’

Rex sprang back, but Leandro, who was between him and the door, pinioned his arms in a deadening grip, and before he could free himself the big German and

the Russian were on him. Their hands pawed him, dredging up in succession, his loose change, his keys, his cigarette-case, and the pistol he had not had time to draw.

‘That fool, Grolle,’ Stein hissed in Inocencia’s face, ‘for all his learning doesn’t know that a native will agree to anything you say for the sake of pleasing you. But I’ve fixed your Mr. Forsan. Whatever he may have been doing in the Sous, he was never with El Hiba. If he had been, he would have known that the Shereef of Tazeroualt and his two sons were among El Hiba’s chief supporters. They raised their tribe, the famous Mokahlia, or Sharpshooters, in his favour, and a French column had to be sent specially from Agadir to deal with them. With or without your permission, gracious lady, I intend to see that our friend is kept until we sail where he cannot get into bad company...’ He paused with deliberation to add: ‘Barbier’s, for instance. And as those who don’t know, can’t split, I think that, on this occasion, we’ll confer without him. We’ll take him on board with us to-night. Perhaps, in the meantime, Don Leandro will see that someone keeps him company...’

The two servants came upstairs and brought Rex down to the kitchen. His last glimpse, as he left the meeting, was of Inocencia, white to the lips, standing in proud isolation among the gesticulating members of the band.

CHAPTER XXII

RUPERT FORSDYKE INTERVENES

FOR thirty-six hours the gale had lasted. In the courtyard of the Pigeon House the vines were as live things in the rude grasp of the great wind. The stiff leaves of the laurel tree planted before the door, as in all old Basque houses, to ward off the lightning, shook with a sound like the rustle of applause as their parent trunk bowed its gleaming head to the fury of the storm. Out on the cliff the long grass was beaten flat by the lashing rain.

Doña Inocencia sat in the sun parlour, listening to the voice of the gale. The old house creaked and groaned and shuddered, and the brimming gutters blended their gurgle with the melancholy drip of the eaves. Before her on its tray of flowered porcelain her breakfast stood untouched.

A day and a night had passed since her discomfiture. All through the previous day she had hoped against hope for some word of Rex. At the break-up of the meeting, in the early hours of the morning, they had carried him off to the Aurora with them through seas which already then were running high; and, though she scarcely believed that he would be allowed to communicate with her, she had counted on getting some news of him from members of the ship's company.

But no one had come ashore, at least not to the Pigeon House. Mountainous seas were thundering against the

Artha and even within the bay the surge of the waves was tremendous.

The last of the stores had been embarked, Don Leandro, who, with Hertz and the two servants, had remained behind at the Pigeon House, explained, and there was no reason why anybody should risk a wetting even to land at the port: there was, of course, no question of using the secret passage in such weather; the launch would be smashed to bits on the rocks. Besides, everyone would be busy with the preparations for departure, which was fixed, provided the storm abated, for the following day.

Inocencia had been down to Valia's to enquire about the girl, and found her absent. Mademoiselle Sara had taken the day off, Valia said, and gone over to San Sebastian to see friends. An American, *très gentille*, most highly recommended by Suvorines, the Russian dressmakers — maybe, Madame knew the maison — of the Rue de la Pompe. Inocencia bought some handkerchiefs and went away.

She intended to call next day and question the girl in a manner that would not arouse her suspicion; but her heart was not in the business. In her present restless mood she felt she had not the patience to start a laborious investigation into the activities of Inspector Barbier while a problem of far greater moment to her peace of mind remained unsolved. Anyway, the mysterious surveillance of the Pigeon House had abruptly ceased, and Hertz had returned late on the previous evening streaming with rain to announce that he had utterly failed to pick up any trace of the detective in Saint-Jean-de-Luz.

She cared nothing about Barbier, nothing about the girl. She wanted Rex. If she could only see him

alone, away from Leandro's prying scrutiny, Grolle's hectoring, the deadly persistence of Stein, he would be able, she felt confident, to put forward a defence that should disarm their suspicions. Perhaps Klau, in his boasting Teuton way, had exaggerated Forsan's competence, just to emphasise his own cleverness in discovering him; perhaps Forsan had not been with El Hiba during the whole period of the rebellion. There must be some simple explanation!

Or perhaps, after all...

But on that supposition she would not suffer herself to dwell. It brought back too vividly to her mind Leandro's bitter reproach, which had touched her the more keenly, that, in the bottom of her heart, she knew it to be justified.

Her face cupped in her hands, her elbows planted on the breakfast-table, she stared out through the streaming windows at the outline of the coast far below, blurred by the spume that hung like vapour over the thunderous breakers. She might be infatuated; but she must know the truth. To think that he was there, a bare mile away, where she saw the Aurora's masts, black and gaunt against the weeping sky, rising above the flat back of the mole, and she could not go to him! Another dreary day, another unending night — must she again lie sleepless, brain afire, heart aching like an old wound, and count the limping hours? — and he would vanish over the grey horizon.

Supposing, after all...

She closed her eyes in agony. He had left Stein's challenge unanswered and voiced no protest as they hurried him away. But she had seen the trouble in his face and the memory of it left her no rest. He was run-

ning a fearful risk. Stein had promised her that no harm should befall him: they merely wished to be on the safe side until, on landing with Hossein and the others on the Sous coast, he should disprove their doubts.

But if he failed to justify himself! No measure of courage — and this man was brave: or of wit — he was resourceful, too — would avail him then. She knew her fellows. Voinik, who had captained a squad of Chinese butchers in the cellars of a Cheka gaol; Grolle, driven from the Cameroons for beating his servant to death; Diacono, a fugitive from the justice of his native Tunis, for a bestial crime of blood — from human hyenas such as these a spy would not receive even the mercy of speedy execution...

She heard the kitchen door open behind her, and, recognising Catarina's halting step, made haste to pour herself out a cup of coffee. Catarina would scold if the breakfast remained untasted. Catarina had been her nurse, and was disposed to presume on the old relationship. But that morning Inocencia was in no mood to be worried. Catarina had been troublesome of late, and had taken to following her mistress about. All through the previous day, as long as Inocencia remained indoors, the old woman was at her side, her eyes fixed on the girl's face with the mutely questioning look of a dumb animal. At last Inocencia had taken the car and driven down to Saint-Jean-de-Luz in the rain to be rid of her.

Now old Catarina stood before her with hands placidly folded on her blue chequered apron.

'Madame, a man is there,' she announced in her impassive Basque way.

Inocencia put down her cup.

‘What does he want?’ she said listlessly.

The old eyes, black as sloes, and shrewd, with a touch of cunning, rested enigmatically on her face.

‘He asks for Monsieur Garrett,’ replied the old woman stolidly. ‘Does Madame wish me to tell Don Leandro? He’s still asleep; but I can wake him...’

Inocencia’s eyes narrowed. Was it Barbier again?

‘Is it anyone you know by sight, Catarina?’ she questioned.

The old woman shook her head.

‘He’s never been here before. A foreigner, by the look of him!’

The girl drained her cup and set it down.

‘I’ll see him,’ she said.

Catarina hesitated.

‘Madame had better let me wake Don Leandro...’

‘Nonsense, Catarina. Where is the man?’

She had risen from her chair and turned to find the old woman standing before her with hands outstretched in supplication.

‘Inocencia, little one,’ she pleaded — and the girl remembered that it was many years since Catarina had called her by her name — ‘go away from this house! Go away and never return! There have always been Latxagues at Usotegia since, more than two hundred years ago, Evariste Latxague, my kinsman, built the house. I was born here; my father, too; and his father and his father’s father before him. I am the last of the Latxagues, and I tell you that the old house is doomed. Last night I heard the Lamiñak crying out of the storm, while the old house rocked and sobbed and groaned: “Stand firm, stand firm! Thou wilt last for ever!” But, Inocencia, little one, our Basque fairies speak by

contraries; and they were foretelling the end of Usotegia...'

Inocencia stared at her in amazement.

'Why, Catarina,' she exclaimed, 'what's come over you? I never heard you go on like this before. I thought you were far too sensible to believe in your stupid Basque superstitions!' She laughed. 'You and your fairies! Go along with you!'

The old woman's eyes glittered.

'Don't laugh at me, Inocencia,' she answered. 'I have the second sight. The night that Latxague died here, when you were a little baby in your cradle, in your father's house in Madrid...' her work-grimed hand made the sign of the Cross '...God rest the poor gentleman's soul... I saw my father, as plainly as I see you now, with his face cold in death as they found him lying on the floor of the kitchen back there after the apoplexy had stricken him. This Basque who is an Englishman has brought ill luck to this house. Don't see him again, don't see this man who asks for him, but go or you'll be dragged down in the fall of Usotegia...'

She dropped to her knees and, throwing her apron over her head, began to rock herself to and fro, moaning, as the Basque women mourn their dead. 'Death, death,' she wailed in a breaking voice, 'I smell it in the air!' And she burst into a torrent of tears.

Inocencia had grown as white as the tablecloth on which her hand rested. For a little spell she was silent while, above the old woman's eerie keening, the clamour of the gale and the furious drumming of the rain against the panes resounded through the room. Then with tender eyes she moved her hand and laid it for an instant on the grizzled head at her feet.

‘Dear Catarina,’ she murmured, ‘you’re a faithful soul. But my fate, whatever it may be, is written. I will see this man...’

She went over to the window and, her long fingers pressed against the glass, gazed with unseeing eyes into the outer greyness. The old servant stood up and shuffled sorrowfully away.

A prolonged and very English ‘O-oh’ on two notes made Inocencia turn round. A tall, lanky man was in the doorway, staring at her with some dismay. The rain trickled in a small cascade from the edges of his belted raincoat, and small beads of moisture glistened on the ends of his neat grey moustache. Though his collar was frayed and his clothing shabby, he wore the slightly arrogant air peculiar to Englishmen of good family, mitigated, however, by the very kindly expression of a rather rugged face. He radiated a sort of genial sympathy which seemed to disperse the heavy atmosphere of the little room.

‘Oh, pardon,’ he began in halting French, ‘c’était Monsieur Garrett...’

‘You’re English, aren’t you?’ said Inocencia in that language. ‘Won’t you take off your wet coat and sit down?’

At once the visitor’s features lost their rather worried look.

‘You speak English, do you, by Jove?’ he remarked, stripping off his mackintosh and throwing it over a chair. ‘Now isn’t that splendid?’ He was mustering the girl’s pale beauty with a very approving eye. ‘I’m not sure if I made myself clear to the old lady who came to the gate. I wanted to see Mr. Garrett. He’s stayin’ here, I believe?’

Inocencia found the well-bred English voice very soothing.

‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘but he’s out at present.’

The lanky man looked very disappointed.

‘Oh! D’you know when he’ll be back, by any chance?’

‘He didn’t say...’

The stranger cocked his eye at her.

‘Perhaps I might wait for a bit, eh, what?’

Deliberately she let her velvety gaze rest for an instant on his face before she answered.

‘By all means,’ she told him. ‘Besides, you can’t go out again in this rain. If you give it a little time, I daresay it’ll clear.’ A pause. ‘Are you a friend of Mr. Garrett’s?’ she asked.

She had made up her mind to prolong the interview, not so much to discover how the stranger had traced Riccy to that house as to steep herself in the immense relief of talking about the man she loved.

‘Rather,’ came the prompt answer to her question. ‘Known him for years.’ He paused. ‘Perhaps I’d better introduce myself,’ he went on. ‘My name’s Forsdyke, Rupert Forsdyke.’ He looked at her with a knowing expression. ‘And you’re Doña Inocencia Santin, I shouldn’t wonder!’

She laughed softly in her throat and his eyes smiled back at her. Her air of frank amusement broke the ice between them.

‘Why, however did you know my name?’ she demanded.

He looked mysterious.

‘Perhaps it’s just as well that old Rex has crawled

out for a bit,' he observed enigmatically. 'I wanted to have a word with you...'

She put her hand to her breast. 'With *me*, Mr. Forsdyke?'

He nodded again. 'Yes. About Rex...'

She gave a nervous laugh. 'What about Mr. Garrett?'

Rupert Forsdyke pursed up his lips and began to finger his moustache. Then he drew his chair a trifle nearer the girl.

'Now, look here,' he began with rather ponderous diplomacy, 'I don't want you to take amiss anything I may say...'

'I trust there will be no need to,' she answered with spirit.

'Please don't misunderstand me, there's a good girl. All the trouble in this jolly old world comes from ignorance. I'm goin' to tell you somethin' that I'm perfectly convinced you don't know. When you've heard what it is...' A vague wave of the hand completed the sentence.

'Don't you think you'd better come to the point?' was her chilly rejoinder.

'There you go,' he observed with a sigh, 'gettin' ratty at once! I'm not sayin' a word against you, my dear. The woman in these cases is almost always in good faith, as I told Sally...'

'Sally?' she repeated dully. 'Who is that?'

He scratched the back of his head with a perplexed air.

'We had to come to it,' he remarked reluctantly. 'But I didn't mean to let it out so soon. She's Rex's wife, dear lady. The lawful Mrs. Garrett!'

She stood up abruptly.

'You're right,' she said in a dull voice. 'All the misery on earth comes from ignorance. I didn't know he was married. Where...where is his wife?'

'She's here...'

'Here?'

'I mean at Saint-Jean-de-Luz. And I'll tell you something else which you may or may not know. He left her on their wedding night to join you at San Sebastian...'

'On their wedding night!' she whispered as though she were speaking to herself. 'When...when were they married?' she asked sharply.

'Wait a minute!' said Forsdyke calmly. 'I've no head for dates, never had. I've got it down in my little book.' He was patting his pockets feverishly. 'Where did I put the infernal thing? Ah, here we are. They were married on the twenty-seventh of May...'

She was silent, putting her mind back over the calendar.

His jaunty manner slipped from him as he watched her.

'I say,' he burst out, 'I didn't know you were goin' to take it so hard. I'd meant to do it so diplomatically, too. I seem fated to make a hash of every blinkin' thing I touch! But I wanted to do what I could for Sally. She sent for me, you see. I found her in tears. It's pathetic. She followed him down here and took a job in some mouldy dressmaker's...'

'Where is she working?'

He started back, so fiercely was the question shot at him. 'At a shop near the Casino; Vera's or Valda's: some name like that.' He grabbed at his pocket. 'I jotted it down in my...'

The door opened quietly and he saw a little old man with a high bald head that shone like ivory framed in the doorway. The girl rattled out something in Spanish and walked across to the window, where she stood with her back to the room and drummed with her fingers on the panes. The old man turned to Forsdyke.

‘You were asking for Mr. Garrett, I think?’ he said in rather mincing English. ‘I’m afraid he won’t be back until late to-night. If you care to call to-morrow morning, you will find him here. I’ll let him know you’re coming.’

‘Oh!’ Forsdyke hesitated, then slowly gathered up his coat. ‘I see! Right, I’ll drift along in the mornin’, tennish, eh, what? If you wouldn’t mind tellin’ Old Rex...’

He glanced uncertainly at the slim back at the window and then, with a vague nod to the other, went away in the wake of a man in a Basque cap who was waiting at the door to show him out.

‘Leandro,’ spoke Inocencia’s voice from the window, as soon as Forsdyke had gone, ‘tell Jean to get the car ready. I’m going down to Valia’s to see that girl.’

‘That is not necessary, Inocencia,’ the old man answered mildly: ‘the girl has just arrived!’

CHAPTER XXIII

THE TRAP

ON parting from Inspector Barbier, the night she went to the Pigeon House, Sally had telegraphed to Rupert Forsdyke in Paris to come to her at once. He was trustworthy, and he was Rex's friend: she felt she could safely confide to him the mission she was too proud to discharge herself. For, while she had made up her mind that it was her duty to convey to Rex the burden of her talk with the detective, she could not bring herself to face her husband until she knew how matters stood between him and Doña Inocencia.

She wired that very night before she went to bed, at urgent rates. If Rupert were in Paris, she calculated, he would catch the night train and be at Saint-Jean-de-Luz on the morning after. The intervening day she decided to devote to a flying visit to San Sebastian (she could get a day permit for the car) in the endeavour to locate Rex's present whereabouts, so that Rupert, on arriving, could go straight to his friend and thereafter, if Rex so wished it, put him in touch with the detective. For herself she could only stand aside, waiting and hoping...

Such was her plan, until the information she gleaned at San Sebastian shattered it to fragments, leaving her nonplussed and broken-hearted. She had never really believed in Rex's infidelity. This woman, she had tried to persuade herself, was merely incidental to the mission he had undertaken. But the evidence of San Sebastian drove her headlong from her fool's paradise.

At San Sebastian the Hôtel Cosmopolite was her only point of departure — she had obtained Doña Inocencia's address at Valia's. To the Cosmopolite, therefore, she first proceeded, and at a venture asked for Rex. The head porter, his attention divided between his petty cashbook, the house telephone at his elbow, a bench of inattentive page-boys, and a steady stream of enquirers, told her with brief politeness that Mr. Garrett had gone away. When? On the previous day. His new address? The man glanced down a register and shook his head. The gentleman had left none; but stay, there had been a message! He fluttered through a file. Yes, they had telephoned that morning to ask that Mr. Garrett's luggage should be forwarded to Hendaye to be called for at the station there by the car from Usotegia. No, he couldn't say whether it were Señorita Santin's villa; but the lady was staying there at present. 'Pas du tout, madame!' He switched from French into German as he turned away from Sally to attend to a persistent Teuton.

Like diplomatists of the old school, head waiters possess the art of calculated indiscretion. They do not babble scandal; but they have silences, inflections of the voice, tiltings of the eyebrows, that tell the truth as bluntly as a divorce court report. Animated by a lavish *pourboire*, the *maître d'hôtel* in the restaurant of the Cosmopolite, where Sally made a pretence of lunching, proved less hurried and more expansive than his harassed colleague in the outer hall had been. In the upshot Sally carried back with her to Saint-Jean-de-Luz the knowledge that Rex had spent five weeks at the Cosmopolite, that during that time he and Doña Inocencia were constantly together, that in the eyes of San

Sebastian he was the beautiful Doña Inocencia's latest lover, and that he had followed the woman to the Pigeon House, where they were at present staying.

Rupert Forsdyke found her pale and listless when, on the following morning, grasping quite the most disreputable-looking suitcase Sally had ever seen, he presented himself. They met in the public sitting-room of her dingy little hotel, a dim and airless cubbyhole tremulous with the buzz of flies, where, from a rack on the wall, a line of dusty Bottins frowned down upon the publications of the hotel industry that trailed unopened upon the table.

'It was good of you to come,' she said, giving him her hand. 'But, oh, Rupert, I'm afraid I've brought you on a wild-goose chase. Now that you are here, there's nothing for you to do...'

He saw that she was nervous and overwrought and, dropping his battered valise, made her sit down beside him on the hard sofa. Bit by bit he got the story from her: her glimpse of Rex at Usotegia, her talk with Inspector Barbier, her enquiries at San Sebastian.

'I give up,' she said when her tale was told. 'We'll start back for Paris in the car as soon as possible.' She glanced out of the window into the street, where the shop awnings flapped in the boisterous wind and, under the beating rain, the gleaming cobbles seemed to be sprouting knives. 'The roads will be terrible in this weather,' she added, 'but anything's better than sitting still!'

He was silent, intent on the cigarette he was rolling. 'Well,' he declared at last, 'we've got the motive of his disappearance, at least. It's the woman part of it that has me beat, m'dear!'

‘You’d understand better if you’d seen her, Rupert,’ she answered sadly. ‘She’s a beautiful creature; I’m not surprised at his falling in love with her...’

‘But it ain’t like the old boy,’ Rupert protested stubbornly. ‘I find it easier to believe in his being mixed up with this anarchist merchant — though, the Lord knows, that’s incomprehensible enough — than to picture him trailing round after a skirt...’

‘We have to face facts,’ she rejoined dully. ‘When a man becomes infatuated...’

‘Circumstances are ag’in’ him, I admit,’ he remarked reflectively. ‘But somehow I can’t see the old boy bein’ infatuated with any woman but you, m’dear...’

She shook her golden head and turned away, biting her lip.

‘You know what people are in a scandalmongerin’ hole like San Sebastian in the season,’ he added. ‘If a fellow takes a girl out to luncheon twice runnin’ he’s her lover!’ He wagged his grizzled poll and deftly ran his tongue along the edge of his cigarette.

‘You must remember,’ she said slowly in a suffocating voice, ‘that I saw them together...’

His lean, brown hand descended upon her small, white one in a comforting clasp.

‘Now, now,’ he murmured gently, ‘you mustn’t cry!’

But the tears burst forth from her eyes and stained her cheeks.

‘I never thought, at least,’ she sobbed, ‘that he could forget so easily. Oh, Rupert, I’m so utterly miserable!’

In his clumsy way he tried to soothe her. ‘Sally, old thing, brace up! I’m goin’ to straighten it all out for you. That’s what I’m here for...’ He fished from an outside pocket an enormous white silk handkerchief,

shook it out to satisfy himself that it was clean, and handed it to her. 'Here, dry your eyes, and let's put our heads together...'

But crouched on the slippery plush sofa, her corn-coloured head pillowed on her arm, she abandoned herself to her grief. Helplessly, he gazed down at her, his wrinkled face rueful as any mask of tragedy, while the artist in him remarked the slim grace of her posture. 'Charmin', charmin', he said to himself. 'I'd like old Rex to paint her like that!'

He put out a hand timidly and patted her shoulder. His man's mind had found a temporary remedy for her distress.

'What about a spot o' breakfast? I bet you've not eaten a thing this mornin'...'

'I don't want anything...'

He crossed the floor and rang the bell.

'But I do: and you're goin' to join me.' From the waiter who appeared he ordered coffee and rolls and honey and eggs. Before the mirror Sally was busy with the borrowed handkerchief.

When the breakfast came, Rupert poured out the coffee and buttered a roll for her as though she were a child.

'You must think me a very messy person,' she remarked rather forlornly as he sat down at her side. 'The last time we met I cried, do you remember? And honestly, I hardly ever cry; my nerves are all in, I guess. You don't know how wretched I've been...' Her lip began to tremble.

'Here,' exclaimed Rupert in highest alarm, 'have an egg! Wait a second! I'll slice the top off for you...'

His extreme earnestness made her smile. 'Dear

Rupert,' she said, 'it was sweet of you to come. Was it frightfully inconvenient to get away?'

In Rupert Forsdyke's experience of life, 'inconvenience' had mostly only one meaning, pecuniary embarrassment, to wit.

'On the contrary,' he observed loftily, 'I was thinkin' of takin' a little holiday.' He lifted an impressive finger. 'And that reminds me, old girl, there's a small matter outstandin' between us!' His hand dived into his trouser pocket and delved up a ball of crumpled paper money. He selected a twenty-franc note from the mass and laid it solemnly beside Sally's plate. 'My debt,' he announced, and added, 'Many thanks!'

'Oh, Rupert,' she murmured, 'there's no hurry about it. You've had a terribly expensive fare down from Paris. I was going to propose, if you wouldn't mind...' She faltered, reddening, fearing to offend him.

'Not the least necessity,' he retorted with perfect equanimity. 'In me, my dear Sally, you see one who is in a fair way to becomin' one of the new-rich. In other words, I have turned my back on that ungrateful hussy, Art, to... er... to bask, as it were, in the smiles of Industry...'

She laughed. 'Do you mean to say you've gone into business, or what?'

He smiled mysteriously.

'In a little while,' he said, 'the hoardings of Paris will flaunt — yes, I think that "flaunt" is the word — a monster painting in oils, entitled "Courage, ye Ruptured!" depicting the Fairy Hygiene descendin' from the clouds to crown a somewhat jaded-lookin' party in his underwear, with a chaplet in the form of Marchand's Patent One-Clip Truss. Pardon these medical details,

m'dear, but in them reposes the secret of my rise to affluence. In me you behold the author of this glorious composition. A veritable masterpiece! There must be over two kilos of crimson lake in the sky alone. Two thousand francs down and two thousand on delivery. And the paint and canvas. Settlement last week. Have another egg?"

She laughed. She had finished, she told him. Her laugh rang a little wistful. She knew the tragedy that lay behind his jesting manner. Rex had told her he was sure that there were times when Rupert did not get enough to eat.

He had lit the cigarette he had rolled and was leaning back in his chair, contemplating her with a thoughtful air.

'Where exactly does this detective bird of yours hang out?' he demanded suddenly.

'At the Hôtel de Provence. You didn't think of seeing him, did you?'

'Oh, I don't know...'

She shook her head. 'You couldn't. Not without Rex's consent.'

'I might stagger up to Uso-what's-its-name and tackle the old boy...'

'No,' she said at once, 'you can't do that without letting him know that I'm here. And I won't have that, Rupert, do you understand?'

'Right-o,' he agreed. 'Aren't you goin' to your jolly old shop to-day?'

She shook her head. 'I sent Madame Valia a note this morning to tell her I wasn't coming back. I thought we might lunch here and start for Paris directly after. Perhaps the rain will have stopped by then.'

He was silent. Then, feeling his chin, he observed:

'I think I'll just pop out and have a shave. You'll want to be lookin' after your packin' and so forth, I daresay...'

Her two cases were already packed and in the car at the door, she told him. She had only to pay her bill and tip the servants. By the time he returned she would be ready...

An hour later she went to the desk to enquire for him. He had not reappeared; but from the porter she ascertained that on leaving he had enquired the way to the Hôtel de Provence. In direct defiance of her wishes, then, he had gone to see Barbier...

She jumped into the car and drove through the pouring rain straight to the detective's hotel. She might yet be in time to prevent Rupert from causing irreparable mischief. But at the Provence she was informed that Inspector Barbier had gone to Bayonne for the day and would not be back until the evening. Yes, a gentleman had asked for him a little half-hour ago. On learning that the Inspector was absent, he had wished to be directed to a house called Usotegia. The proprietor, Sally's informant, remembered the name because nobody knew the house and they had had to send for the cook, an aged beldame who had lived all her life in Saint-Jean-de-Luz.

In blank dismay Sally went out to the car. Rupert had a good half-hour's start of her, but if he had walked she might yet head him off. But she reached the old fort, bleak and rugged against the rain-swept sky, and parked the Talbot outside the estaminet below, without seeing him; and when she had mounted the cliff road the

path stretched its empty length before her to the low roof of the Pigeon House.

Here on the upland the wind blew great guns. She turned up the collar of her aquascutum and, bending her head to the gale, began to struggle forward. She had suddenly remembered the tram. If Rupert had come out by tram, he would approach the house from the land side. If she went as far as the gate of Usotegia, she might yet intercept him; at any rate, she could wait a little to see if he would come.

She followed the path round the outer wall of the enclosure and reached the entrance. The gates were shut and the blank expression of their smooth and weather-greyed timbers seemed like the reflection of the abominable desolation upon which they gazed: the long, yellowing grass pancaked by the rain-squalls; the stunted bushes, gleaming with wet, writhing before the onslaught of the wind; the reddish track, with its brimming ruts; and beyond it the deserted 'Halte' of the tramway, dwarfed by the towering power standards looming, like gibbets, above it.

She was glad of the gate's shelter from the fury of the storm. Her face, whipped into a glow by the wind and rain, was streaming with wet and a golden wisp of hair was plastered against her cheek. She had taken off her small hat to shake it, when an ingratiating voice said in her ear:

'Good-morning!'

She started and turned, to find at her side a sallow-faced youth in a black mackintosh with large ears projecting from either side of his check cap.

'Vos you vantin' annything, please?' he asked in a sort of snuffling singsong.

For the moment, in her surprise at being accosted, it did not strike her as odd that he should have addressed her in English. As she did not reply immediately, he added:

‘P'r'aps you vos goin' to the 'ouse, no?

His eyes, beady and quick like those of a mouse, coned her face sharply.

‘No,’ she answered at length. ‘As a matter of fact, I rather expected to meet a friend of mine here...’

‘Thinnish party, vos it?’ he broke in at once. ‘Greyish 'air, about five fut eleven in 'eight, valks with a bit of a stoop like, dressed in a mack. Vith a belt?’

That was certainly a rigorously accurate description of Rupert, she reflected.

‘He's been here, then?’ she said.

‘Sure,’ answered the other eagerly and, pulling a string, thrust open a wicket in the gate. ‘Nime o' Forster, vorn't it?’

‘Forsdyke...’ she corrected.

‘That's ri'! That's the nime 'e give. 'Ere you are, lidy. 'E's up at the 'ouse now, a-vaitin' for yer!’

He was edging her so insistently towards the gate, that, in sheer self-defence, to avoid his disagreeable contact, she stepped through the wicket into the yard. Quick as a flash, he passed in after her and shut the door behind him.

She stood and faced him in the rain.

‘You say that Mr. Forsdyke is here?’ she demanded rather tensely. She was furious with Rupert. How dare he disobey her?

‘That's ri', mum. And expectin' of yer. “Ef a lidy calls,” 'e sez to me, “show 'er strite hup!” 'e sez.’

He glanced towards the house. 'And 'ere's the old voman come to fetch yer!'

The woman who had admitted her before was looking out at the front door. The young man ran over and spoke to her. Then he came back to Sally.

'She sez for you to go hup,' he announced.

'But there must be some mistake,' Sally protested. 'Mr. Forsdyke didn't know I was coming. He couldn't have known. I don't believe I'll go in. Tell Mr. Forsdyke I'm waiting here!'

'E sez for you to go hup, don't I keep on tellin' yer?' remarked the youth in an injured voice.

She felt greatly mystified. Was it possible that Rupert had made good his promise to 'straighten things out'? But how could he have guessed that she would follow him?

'Is Mr. Garrett here?' she asked.

'Sure 'e is,' replied the other eagerly. ''Im and Mr. Forster's together now!'

She hesitated no longer. Rupert would never have sent for her unless Rex had been able to explain things satisfactorily. Her heart beat faster at the thought that in a minute, perhaps, she and Rex would be in one another's arms. She was tremulous with excitement. The prospect of ending the misery of the long weeks since her wedding day obsessed her, clouding her better judgment. She followed the old woman into the house.

Through a long, dim room they went and up a winding staircase, past a landing to the second floor. In a whitewashed corridor, where some dusty trunks were stacked and a tap rapped a little dirge in tremolo, clinkety-clonk, clinkety, clink, clank, clonk, as it dripped into a battered sink, the old woman opened a door.

Sally saw a small bedroom looking out over the sea through a long window that gave upon a balcony. The old woman had flung back the shutters.

‘A little minute!’ she muttered. Her sandals made her going noiseless as she crept away.

Sally looked about her. She wondered why she had been shown into a bedroom. Then she recalled having read in her guide-book that a Basque house has no sitting-room other than the kitchen. The room smelt musty as though it had been long shut up.

She pulled the window open and went out on the balcony. At once the angry roar of the sea mounted to her ears. The balcony, all atremble in the strong wind, seemed to hang out right over the water. Below it the façade of the house dropped sheer away, and below that again the cliff swooped down to the beach and the boiling tide. The balcony ran the whole length of the house, which, on the right, some way under the balcony, was joined by a high wall which extended to the outer wall of the enclosure.

She was gazing at the view, all blurred by rain and mist, when she heard the door in the room behind her open. She turned about and saw Doña Inocencia.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE HAND AT THE DOOR

SALLY stepped quickly back into the room.

She was suddenly very angry. She had nothing to say to this creature who, unwittingly or otherwise, had stolen her husband from her. This interview, she presumed, was of Rupert's contrivance. What a fool she had been to confide in him! She might have known that, in his well-meaning, muddle-headed way, he would make a hash of things. Did he, did this woman who was staring at her with such strange intentness, really imagine that she was going to discuss her husband's desertion in the manner of a problem play? Doña Inocencia could keep her lover for all she cared; and she would let Rupert know what she thought of his presumption.

But as she met the other's mute scrutiny she felt the heat of her resentment cooling. Her first thought was that she had never seen a look so tragic on any woman's face. There was the sternness of marble about the pale and chiselled features, and the eyes were as though seared with the fire of some great anguish. But presently, as they faced one another in a silence which made itself known to the senses like another presence in the room, it seemed to Sally that a new expression crept into the eyes that surveyed her so fixedly. A sort of sullen hostility peered out of their liquid depths. To her quick intuition it signalled the message that the other feared her as a rival. It determined Sally to put an end as soon as possible to a situation which she felt to be

intolerable. Shielding herself with the knowledge as with a buckler, she remarked stiffly:

‘I think there must be a mistake. It was Mr. Forsdyke I wished to see...’

‘I know,’ said Doña Inocencia with cool arrogance — with a little pang of jealousy Sally remarked the caressing timbre of her speaking voice — ‘but *I* wanted to meet you!’

There was an air of patronage in the way she stressed the first person which Sally was prompt to resent.

‘Will you kindly let Mr. Forsdyke know that I’m waiting?’ she said rather tensely.

‘It’s too late to do that,’ was the impassive reply. ‘Mr. Forsdyke has gone...’

Sally stared at the speaker. ‘But,’ she protested, growing a little flurried, ‘he left word that he was expecting me. He sent down to the gate just now to say I was to come up...’

Doña Inocencia gave a dry laugh. ‘That was Hertz,’ she said. ‘Highly imaginative, like all of his race. But thorough. He knew I wished to see you.’

Sally’s blue eyes glittered. Her cheeks were very pink.

‘You mean to say that Mr. Forsdyke did not send for me?’

Doña Inocencia’s reply was a slight movement of the shoulders. Sally advanced resolutely towards the door. Doña Inocencia stepped before it.

‘How dare you try and stop me?’ cried Sally. ‘Will you kindly let me pass?’

Doña Inocencia shook her head. ‘You and I have to have a talk,’ she said.

‘Will you please understand,’ the other broke in

warmly, 'that I've no intention of discussing anything with you! I've been brought here under false pretences, and I'm going! Stand away from that door!'

But the slender figure facing her did not budge.

'I want to speak to you,' said Doña Inocencia, and seemed to sigh, 'about Mr. Garrett...'

Sally gasped. How much had that wretched Rupert blurted out?

'Listen to me,' she broke in, trying in vain to steady her voice. 'You don't want a scandal here, I take it. But you may as well understand that I don't intend to be detained here against my will. If you don't let me pass at once, I warn you I shall scream for help...'

The other's laugh was contemptuous. She called over her shoulder sharply: 'Jean!' Forthwith the door opened and a grimy, unshaven face, topped off by a Basque cap, was thrust in. 'You understand that this lady is not to leave the house?' she asked.

'Yes, Madame,' the man replied. She dismissed him with a wave of the hand.

'Stay within earshot!' she ordered.

The head was withdrawn and the door fell to.

The woman turned to Sally again.

'Scream if you feel like it,' she said. 'But there is nobody here but the servants and they'll take no notice. And, as you may have observed, there's not another house within a mile of this. If you insist on being melodramatic, I can't prevent it. But I warn you it won't have the slightest effect!'

Sally had a sudden feeling of panic. She knew that the other spoke the truth, that she was powerless to summon help. The deep-throated boom of the ocean,

the whistling of the wind, the hiss of the rain swelling in through the open window, seemed to stress the utter solitude of the house. Indoors the silence was so absolute that she could hear the solemn tinkle of the leaky tap in the passage. If she screamed and Rex were in the house, he would come, she knew, to her assistance. But that would mean a vulgar scene, and she found the idea repellent. Besides, her mind retained a terrifying memory of that hulking figure lurking in the corridor, ready to spring to Doña Inocencia's aid.

But, loath to confess herself beaten, she turned and ran swiftly out upon the swaying balcony in the vague hope of there discovering a means of escape. Three other rooms opened out upon it, two to the left, one to the right. But they were close-shuttered and the shutters were fastened on the inside. Her helpless glance over the balustrade showed her, through the curtain of the rain, the heaving ocean spread out far below at the foot of the cruel rocks. Slowly she returned to the room.

Doña Inocencia pointed to a chair. 'Sit down!' she said.

But Sally, ignoring the invitation, cried out:

'What do you want with me?'

She was a very level-headed person; and her common sense was coming to her rescue. She might as well make the best of a bad job, she told herself. After all, the situation which had been forced upon her was decidedly interesting.

'Mr. Garrett is your husband, they tell me,' said Doña Inocencia.

Sally looked at her boldly. 'Well?'

'You were married on the twenty-seventh of May.'

Mr. Garrett arrived at San Sebastian on the twenty-ninth, two days later. Therefore, he must have left you almost immediately after your wedding. Why?’

Sally’s spirits were reviving. The consciousness that she was the possessor of information which Doña Inocencia was anxious to obtain gave her a most encouraging sense of superiority. She affected nonchalance, examining her pinkly shining nails.

‘Didn’t my husband tell you?’ she countered evenly.

A shadow seemed to fall across the pallid face before her. With a sort of gasp Doña Inocencia said:

‘I didn’t know he was married...’

Sally shrugged her shoulders.

‘Ah!’ she commented drily. ‘That has happened before to women who play around with other women’s husbands...’

The dark eyes glittered angrily.

‘You haven’t answered my question’—the deep voice was a little husky. ‘Why did your husband desert you?’

Sally was rubbing her nails on the palm of her hand.

‘Hadn’t you better ask him that question?’

‘I should advise you to tell me what I want to know,’ said the other rather tremulously.

Sally detected the note of anger in her tone.

‘And if I don’t know myself?’ she suggested.

A sudden eagerness crept into Doña Inocencia’s face.

‘Was that why you followed him down here?’ she demanded.

Sally was silent.

‘Listen to me,’ said the other rather hoarsely. ‘This man who abandoned you virtually at the altar means nothing to you. I’m not saying that you’re not...

fond of him, that you don't feel ill-used and all that. But it must be clear to you that he cares very little about you. You...you see that, don't you?'

'Well?' The blue eyes were suddenly watchful.

'Well, if you have any pride, you surely won't want to thrust yourself forward where you're not wanted. You're...you're a very beautiful girl, the type that some men rave about' — Sally's rising colour deepened at this feminine thrust — 'and you'll have no difficulty in marrying again...'

In a little nervous movement Sally was tapping the nails of one hand against the palm of the other.

'Have you...have you talked over this...this suggestion with my husband?' she asked rather tensely.

'No. I told you I didn't know he was married. He has never even mentioned your name to me. So, you see...'

She finished off the sentence with a gesture of indifference. 'Don't think,' she broke in, seeing that Sally was about to speak, 'don't think that I don't recognise your rights in the matter. You're American and a straight business proposal will appeal to you. You shall be generously compensated, *ma petite!*' And, her assurance stimulated by the girl's silence, she added gaily: 'You'll never regret this wayward husband of yours, I promise you, *Mademoiselle Sara!*'

'Have you quite finished?' said Sally quietly. Doña Inocencia looked at her uneasily. 'Because,' the girl went on in the same steady voice, 'I want to ask you a question. How long have you known my husband?' Her voice was suddenly very eager.

'For about a month. Why?'

Sally leaned forward. 'You met him, then, for the first time, only the other day?'

‘Yes...’ Doña Inocencia looked puzzled.

‘At the Hôtel Cosmopolite, at San Sebastian, wasn’t it?’

‘Certainly! Within a week or so of your wedding...’ she added rather cuttingly.

Sally laughed happily. ‘Ah!’ she remarked. ‘That was what I wanted to know. Now,’ she continued, ‘I’m going to tell *you* something. You’ve insulted me, you’ve insulted my country, you’ve insulted my husband. I’ll say you didn’t talk over your precious proposal with my husband! Women don’t sell their men in America, or in England, either. I’d only known my husband for three months before we were married, but...’

‘For three months,’ Doña Inocencia’s shocked whisper broke in. ‘You say you’d only known him for three months? Where did you meet him first?’

The utter agony of the woman’s face halted Sally in the full flow of her outburst. The luminous eyes wore a haunted look; and the expression of the mouth was pitiful.

‘It was at Cannes, if you want to know,’ answered Sally rather grudgingly.

‘At Cannes!’ The voice was like a sigh. With her long white hands clasped before her, the slim fingers intertwined, she fixed a look of piteous appeal on the flushed and eager face before her. ‘Tell me, when was this?’

‘In March...’

‘In March...!’

Her whisper was like a soft breath. She fell back a pace, one hand clutching her heart, and closed her eyes.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Sally, stepping forward. ‘Are you ill?’

The dark eyes opened and the look of fury they blazed forth made the girl draw back.

‘So,’ cried Doña Inocencia in a raucous and savage voice, ‘you’d play the spy, would you?’ She opened her hands with the fingers outstretched like claws, and shook them before her in a gesture of impotent rage. She rapped out a sharp exclamation in Spanish. ‘I don’t know what prevents me from choking the life out of you where you stand! You’d dare to bring detectives here to spy on me?’

Sally stared at her in amazement. The onslaught was so utterly unexpected. She could not bring herself to believe that Rupert had been so insanely foolish as to blurt out the whole story of Inspector Barbier and his mission. And what had the date of her meeting with Rex to do with it?

‘But you’re going to answer my questions now,’ Doña Inocencia went on in the same hoarse and threatening tones. ‘Why did your husband leave you and go to San Sebastian?’

‘If I knew, I shouldn’t tell you,’ said Sally stoutly, wondering if she looked as scared as she felt.

‘Don’t lie to me!’ cried the other fiercely. ‘You know that you’re both in this together. But there’s someone here who’ll get the truth out of you if I can’t. Jean!’ she called.

It seemed to Sally as though the flow of blood to her heart had stopped. The door opened and the gruff voice said: ‘Voilà!’

‘Send Don Leandro to me!’

Don Leandro! That was the name of the disgusting old man who had given her the money. Like a wave of nausea, fear was swelling up within her.

'Don Leandro has gone down to the harbour, Madame,' the man was saying, 'to see if he can get a boat to take him off to the Aurora to fetch Forsan!'

Doña Inocencia walked to the door.

'What are you going to do?' asked Sally: her voice seemed to come from a long way off.

'Will you answer my questions?' Doña Inocencia demanded.

'I've nothing to say!' the girl answered. Then, seeing that the other was stepping into the corridor, she screamed out: 'I won't stay here! You've no right to detain me...!'

The door was slammed in her face.

She tore at the handle, but a firm grasp held it and the next moment she heard the click of the bolt as the door was locked. She rattled the knob and beat on the panels with her clenched fists, crying out, shrilly, brokenly, incoherently, in a frenzy of anger and fear. When at last she desisted to stand and listen, eyes wide with terror, hands bruised, and heart thumping like a piston, the house was once more blanketed in silence. In the leaden hush the musical tinkle of the tap in the passage seemed to be ticking away the minutes to eternity...

It was long before she regained her calm. At last she sat down on a chair, closed her eyes, and strove to collect her thoughts. It was clear that Rex was not in the house: if he had been he would have answered her cries for help, hers or any other woman's. Rupert would have gone back to the hotel. What would he do when he found her missing? With a cold feeling of dismay she remembered she had told the manager,

when she had paid her bill, that she was starting off for Paris by road. They had seen her luggage in the car; they had watched her drive away: of course, they would tell Rupert, when he came back to call for her, that she had gone without him. And Rupert would return to Paris by train! She wrung her hands in silent agony. Rex was now her only hope. But what had become of him?

The rain sang as it splashed down the streaming windows...

Three o'clock, her watch said: she had been locked in for over two hours. She had moved her chair to the window and was staring out into the weeping afternoon. The storm had swept the ocean clean of all craft, save in the bay, where, stabbing the lowering sky beyond the mole, the masts of the anchored yachts rose and fell in the swell. She was thinking about Rex again. It comforted her to remember that he had only met this woman lately. Had Rex gone deliberately to San Sebastian, in the course of his mysterious mission, because Doña Inocencia was there? The woman was certainly implicated in the affair which Rex was investigating: her charge that Rex and Sally were in league against her confirmed it...

A little sound in the passage sent her flying to the door. She stooped to the keyhole, listening. The house was eerily still. Now and then a board creaked as though the old mansion were stirring in its sleep. Clank-clonk, clinkety-clank, clink, went the tap.

Slowly she went back to her chair...

What were they going to *do*? She had promised her-

self not to look at her watch for half an hour. It was ten minutes past five when she had last seen the time. She must keep cool. This was not the Middle Ages. People weren't kidnapped in broad daylight. They must have forgotten about her. She sprang up and went and hammered on the door.

'Let me out! Let me *out!*' she wailed...

They couldn't hurt her if she refused to speak. But that old man, Don Leandro, they called him, had an evil face. What should she do if she were to look up and see him standing across the room there, in the doorway, ogling her uncleanly with his bleary eyes and licking his thin lips, as he had mustered her that evening under the lighted porch? Although it was only eight o'clock, already the twilight of this grey day of storm was stealing into the bedchamber, thronging the dusty corners with dim shadows that seemed to watch and wait. With feverish haste she began to barricade the door. Straining and panting, she dragged forward the heavy chest of drawers, set the washstand against it, and lifted the table to top the pile.

Then she sat down again to wait.

If only her heart would not thump so!

As the gloom of evening deepened, her courage oozed away...

No light left now by which to tell the time; only a vague greyness in the window opening to lift the shadows on the opposite wall where the barricade reached halfway up the door. Outside the rain had ceased and a warm and gusty wind blew sweetly into the room. The sea boomed loudly and the black vault

above it was fitfully luminous with beacons that wheeled and flashed majestically across the tossing waters.

But the girl in the chair had her back to the vision of the night and her ears were closed to the voice of wind and sea. She was desperately afraid now, numbed by an icy fear that seemed to bear her company in the darkness. Her eyes were set upon the outline of the door, just discernible in the dimness above her frail barricade; her ears were strained for any sound in the corridor foreign to the familiar dripping of the tap...

Now she heard it, a light, mincing step in the passage, unhurried, inexorable. A pause. She thought she would die if she saw the barricade stir. The rattle of a key in the lock, a long chink of light, a muttered exclamation as the door jarred against the obstacle, and she was on her feet, screaming, screaming. The barricade swayed and tottered; the table was dislodged with a crash; and in the chink of light between door and door-post she saw a yellowish skinny hand come groping...

CHAPTER XXV

IN WHICH REX GARRETT ASKS A QUESTION

ONCE more Doña Inocencia was in the sun-parlour of the Pigeon House.

With unseeing eyes she stared out upon the blank monotony of the rainy scene, brooding, as the darkness fell, over the ruins of her dream. She lay back in the long wicker chair as she had lain all through the dragging afternoon, hands joined before her breast, middle fingers, slender, taper-tipped, pressed against the vermillion line of her lips, oblivious of the passage of time, numbed and crushed and broken.

Thus she had descended from her momentous interview with the prisoner upstairs. It seemed to her as though her very soul were bruised. Not the discovery that Riccy possessed a wife; not this Yankee's contemptuous pride, or, worse affront, her radiant beauty; not the threatened ruin of their enterprise was it that had sent her reeling back in disarray. What had borne her to the ground and left her stunned and resourceless was the realisation of the treachery of the man she loved, who, even while she wooed him in her folly, was conspiring against her with the woman of his choice. Her mind was blunted to any sense of danger, occupied only with the thought that he was an impostor who had coldly and deliberately made use of her. She felt humiliated to the very earth.

Leandro had not come back. She had no idea as to how long he had been away. Before leaving he had said nothing about going to bring Rex ashore. He had

simply announced the arrival of the girl from Valia's and disappeared.

'Wait for me to see the young woman,' had been his parting injunction. 'Now that Hertz has landed her here so cleverly, I'll find a means of getting at the truth!'

And he had croaked his jarring laugh and sidled quietly away, as Inocencia thought, to see the man Forsdyke off the premises.

She had disobeyed him. She knew that he only suspected a connection between Riccy and this girl: she had not disclosed to him the fact that they were married. Her pride was up in arms; and before telling Leandro the truth she was eager to convince herself that the girl's interest was confined to nothing more than the desire to locate a missing husband—which would also serve to explain the detective's appearance on the scene.

Besides, she was consumed with a sort of morbid curiosity to see this woman who was Riccy's wife. When Jean told her the motive of Leandro's absence she guessed at once that the old man meant to use the girl to surprise, if he could, the false Forsan into an admission. But by that time she knew the truth, the ghastly truth that seemed to have torn her heart wide open. Nothing else mattered then. With the fatalism which the Spaniard derives from his Moorish ancestry, she had sat down to wait for Don Leandro...

The room was almost black before the sense of time came back to her and, stirring in her chair, she cried out for Catarina. When no answer came, she rose up and went to the door. An oil lamp burned on the dresser in the kitchen, but the front door stood wide;

and, when she glanced towards the row of pegs where the old woman's bonnet and shawl were wont to hang, she saw that they were gone.

Sombrely she nodded to herself as Catarina's forebodings recurred to her mind. She knew the force of Basque superstition. Then she called for Jean; but her voice rang empty against the rafters, and she remembered that Jean was a Basque as well. Pedro, she remembered, had gone out with Leandro, and of Hertz, who all that day had been hanging about the yard, there was no sign.

A grim smile flickered for an instant about her mouth. So she was alone in the house with Riccy's bride. She paused at the foot of the staircase and listened. All was still above-stairs. Even the gurgling of the gutters, which had rung in her ears all day, was hushed; for the rain had ceased. She wondered what the girl was doing. Now that she looked back, she seemed to remember despairing cries, muted by distance, that had cut across her sombre hours of meditation. Her eyes grew pensive. It must be frightening to be shut up there in the 'dark at the top of the old house...

Her features hardened. Bah, it would do this arrogant Yankee good to have her spirit tamed! What if she went up to see how the prisoner was faring? She shrugged her shoulders and turned away. Time enough when Leandro came. She wondered what had happened to make him so late. Perhaps they were waiting for nightfall to come ashore. Well, they wouldn't be long now...

She took a box of matches from the dresser and, passing into the sun-parlour, kindled the lamp. As the light flamed up, the immense panorama of the night,

jewelled with beacon-fires, seemed to recede from the long windows which formed one side of the sun-parlour. The grimy panes and blistered paint-work of the windows and the mildewed walls appeared in the lamp rays.

Sinking into a high-backed oak chair at the table, she let her gaze travel over the discoloured walls. Sunshine and happiness must have once dwelt there, for traces of gay colours were yet discernible through the damp-blotches and about the patches of white where t' lime-wash had crumbled away. Perhaps this same old Latxague, whom death had overtaken in his loneliness in the dim kitchen behind, had decorated the little room for his young wife, someone golden and radiant and dainty like that other bride whom the Pigeon House now sheltered.

How pretty the parlour must have been, with the brilliant Basque sunshine bathing its frescoed walls! Struts of bamboo, painted in high relief, stretched from raftered ceiling to dado, to simulate the framework of a Japanese summer house, where a riot of roses, their colours faded now, clambered against a background of palms and azure sea under a sky yet faintly flecked with fleecy clouds. There were real arbours, not painted shells, like that at Cannes, she reflected, with glimpses of sparkling ocean between the spreading branches of the parasol pines and the smoke-blue outline of the Esterel behind. Perhaps in some such setting as this Riccy had told the other of his love...

A tear trickled down her cheek and splashed on the table. As through a mist she gazed down the vista of her storm-tossed life. If she had met this man ten years ago! Tear followed silently on tear as she thought

of that night at San Sebastian, outside her bedroom door, when he had crushed her in his arms. Had that been acting, too? Now she would never know. He had crossed her path too late. 'Too late!' she whispered brokenly; and 'Too late!' the south wind seemed to echo as it buffeted the quiet house.

Then she raised her eyes and saw him standing on the other side of the table, gazing down upon her tear-stained face.

His hair was dank, his clothes were wet and clinging to him, and he looked inexpressibly weary. But he bristled tensely with an air of vigilance; and, as he contemplated her in silence, she had the impression that he was listening.

The shock of his unexpected appearance brought her to her feet in sudden alarm.

'Where's Leandro?' she asked quickly.

He made no answer; but his eyes were always on her face.

She put forth her hand gingerly and touched his sleeve.

'You're sopping wet,' she said and paused, while her eyes widened in wonderment. Then, aghast: 'You don't mean to say you swam ashore. In that sea?'

He nodded the curtest of affirmatives.

Her eyes seemed reluctant to leave his face as she tiptoed to the door and listened. The kitchen was deserted as she had seen it before, the old oak gleaming in the feeble light of the lamp on the dresser. In the house nothing stirred. She shut the door and stole back to his side.

'They've found you out, is that it?' she asked in a low voice. 'And so you've come back to me?'

Still he did not speak, gazing at her with unchanging sternness.

She had meant to be strong, and bitter, and unforgiving. But when she saw him there before her, worn and weary and hunted, her resolution melted away. A great tenderness shone in her face.

'You did right to put your faith in me,' she told him in her warm contralto. 'You might have known I wouldn't fail you. The car is outside on the fronton, Riccy. You shall take me away...' And, seeing that he still was silent, she went on: 'I'll ask no questions, dear. What is past is past. We'll start a new life together wherever you like...'

Her voice trailed off as he remained obstinately mute. For a moment suspense was spanned between them like a steel wire. She stood apart with eyes downcast and lashes that glistened in the light.

'If it's this wife of yours...' she began and broke off to search his face. Then, when the grim features did not relax, she cried: 'Oh, Riccy, that is no mate for you! You want something more than a pretty face. Let her go! I've got money and I'll see she doesn't suffer...' She put her hands on his shoulders and her dark eyes gazed pleadingly into his. 'Look at me, Riccy, and say if you can that she's more desirable than I am, you who have held me against your heart and kissed my lips! Oh, my dear, speak to me! I'm waiting...'

And then he raised his hands and very gently lifted hers from his shoulders. The touch of his fingers was like ice on her wrists. With eyes tragic with foreboding and with a bloodless face, she fell back faltering, gripping the edge of the table behind her for support.

His mouth was a hard line.

‘No!’ he said.

‘You mean,’ she asked unsteadily, ‘you mean that you won’t give up your wife?’

‘I mean,’ he answered, ‘that by midnight to-night you’ll be in prison in Bayonne!’

His face was impassive; but his eyes were bright, as he watched her intently. She made no outcry. She only laid her hand wearily against her brow. Her head fell forward.

He stepped to the door and listened. His heavy tread resounded on the bare boards as he stepped back to the table.

‘Do you remember Louis Larralde?’ he said.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE INDICTMENT

AT the name of Larralde she stiffened into attention. Her hand fell away from her face. She looked at him queerly.

‘Captain of Chasseurs,’ said Rex. ‘On the staff at Bayonne. Year, what? about 1921. Not forgotten Larralde, have you?’

His tone puzzled her. Curt, crisp sentences delivered on a sort of impersonal note, like a police official giving evidence.

‘Well?’ she asked, listlessly.

‘He loved you. The loveliest thing he’d ever seen, he said you were. You lived at Biarritz then. With your mother. He wanted to marry you, but you wouldn’t consent to a public engagement. Every night after dinner he’d take the train to Biarritz and meet you in the garden of your villa. Do you remember those nights?’

‘Why are you telling me this?’ she demanded sombrely.

‘Wait and you’ll see. The Spaniards were fighting the Rifis. The French were still neutral; but the Spanish General Staff kept them posted about operations in the Spanish Zone. A big drive was impending and the Spaniards came to Bayonne for a conference with the French General Staff. A secret conference: the French were scared of criticism in Parliament. Larralde was present. His job was to make a *précis* — a

report, you know — for the War Ministry in Paris...'

The deep voice was frigidly dispassionate; but the grey eyes were accusing. She stirred uneasily under that stern regard.

'The report had to be ready by six o'clock the next morning. He was to hand it over at the train to the special messenger who was leaving for Paris. Larralde should have worked on it all the evening in the General Staff office and lodged it and all the documents in the safe for the night. But you and your mother were returning to Madrid next day for the winter and he'd promised to go over to Biarritz to say good-bye...'

He broke off as though to listen, turning his head sideways towards the door. Her face softened as her eyes rested on the clear-cut profile, the straight nose, the firm mouth. She averted her gaze as he turned towards her again.

'Larralde took the papers back to his flat and worked on them until it was time to go to Biarritz. He meant to finish off his report when he got back. Before he left, he locked everything away in his desk. While he was away in Biarritz, his flat was entered and the documents were stolen...'

She had regained her self-possession now. With a hand poised carelessly on her hip, she shook her shining black head defiantly as she faced him.

'I've listened to you patiently enough,' she said, 'but I must ask what all this is leading up to. Now you mention it, I seem to recall this man, a regular Basque savage, he was, if I remember rightly. But...'

'Wait!' he checked her peremptorily with hand upraised. She saw that it was clenched and trembling. 'Wait,' he told her, 'and hear me to the end!' He

paused as though to master his emotion and in the sudden hush she heard the mutter of the ocean give sullen answer to the shrieking of the wind.

‘A man in love will do unaccountable things,’ he resumed rather hoarsely. ‘Larralde lost his head. He didn’t wait for the theft to be discovered, but bolted across the frontier into Spain. This . . . this Basque savage, as you call him’ — the grey eyes were smouldering with anger now and the firm chin jutted grimly out — ‘realised that he couldn’t tell the truth without compromising you, a young, unmarried girl. And he knew he’d be held responsible for the loss of the documents, for he’d been expressly cautioned against taking them out of barracks. He didn’t stop to think that his flight would be taken as an admission of guilt. They sentenced him to five years’ penal servitude by default.’

He broke off to wipe his lips with his handkerchief. With eyes fixed meaningly on the girl he continued his tale.

‘He was utterly at a loss to know who had betrayed him. He hadn’t breathed a word about the conference to anybody. For two years he believed he’d fallen a victim to a spy who’d broken into his quarters on the chance of what he might find. It didn’t occur to him that you were the only person who knew he’d be absent from Bayonne that night. At least, not then . . .’

She shrugged her shoulders.

‘You seem to be giving a melodramatic turn to a very harmless affair,’ she remarked carelessly. ‘I remember Larralde now. A desperately serious person, years older than I.’ She smothered a yawn. ‘He bored me to extinction, my dear . . .’

But Rex ignored the interruption.

‘Larralde joined the Foreign Legion. There he met Klau. Klau had your signed photograph and boasted you had been his mistress...’

She stamped her foot.

‘I told you he lied!’ she cried furiously, her black eyes blazing.

‘Because Larralde believed it was a lie,’ he returned steadily, ‘he swore to discover how that photograph came into Klau’s possession, if he had to kill him. But Klau was transferred to another battalion and they didn’t meet again until last March, on the Ouergha front...’

She had dropped her pose of indifference and was listening intently. With a glance at the door, he continued:

‘Larralde had been away for a month in hospital. On returning to duty, he was posted to another battalion which was in the front line. The night he joined he was sent out to a listening-post. A man was there already. It was Klau. Larralde played on Klau’s vanity and so got at the truth. Do you know what Klau told him?’

‘What?’ she said. Her voice was lifeless.

‘That you were a common spy, that you’d worked for the German Intelligence in Spain during the war...’

‘And what if I did?’ she broke in shrilly. ‘Am I French? Am I British? The Americans sold shells to the Allies. Why shouldn’t I lend my brains to the Germans?’

‘Klau met you in Barcelona, in 1917,’ the accusing voice persisted. ‘You were only eighteen and already the German Secret Service were using you for every ignoble purpose to which women spies are put...’

‘You don’t believe that, Riccy?’ she interrupted

breathlessly. 'I've been no man's mistress. I told you that before...'

'...Your extreme youth, your...your virginal air, was your greatest asset, Klau told Larralde. French and British agents were off their guard with this charming jeune fille fresh from a convent school who lived with her mother at the best hotel. You stopped at nothing, Klau said...'

'God!' she burst out, 'must I tell you again that this pig of a German lied? Riccy, I swear to you by the Virgin Mary...'

'Let me finish!' he told her coldly. 'Larralde asked Klau what you were doing now. Klau winked and opened his purse. "Still earning her living," he said, and displayed an envelope addressed to him in your writing, containing five thousand-franc notes...'

He stopped, breathing hard.

'Larralde killed Klau,' he said.

Her eyes widened.

'Killed him?' she repeated uncertainly.

'He beat his brains out with a spade,' was the blunt rejoinder. 'Not from jealousy, but to get those mille notes that would take him home to bring you to justice.' He lifted an accusing finger. 'That is one death that lies at your door...!'

She was silent, staring at him fixedly.

'In Klau's pocket-book,' the stern voice set forth, 'Larralde found your letter enclosing the notes. You congratulated Klau on finding Forsan and said you'd look out for them at the rendezvous between the first and the thirtieth of June. Basques always hang together and Larralde knew this man Forsan. He also knew what Klau didn't know, when he died, that For-

san had been killed that very night, coming up with the water fatigue. There were, therefore, no obstacles in the way. Two nights later, Larralde deserted to the enemy and eventually reached Tangier. There in a café a man sold him the papers of one Pedro Gomez, who, as Larralde was to discover later, was a notorious Spanish anarchist . . .’

She looked up quickly. ‘It’s a common enough name in Spain,’ she commented. ‘But . . . an anarchist? You . . . you don’t mean the Gomez who was guillotined in Paris a few weeks ago, surely? For the murder of a detective called Barbier?’

Rex nodded with set face.

‘But I don’t see . . .’ she began.

‘Wait!’ he bade her. ‘I’ve almost done. Larralde reached Paris and there disaster overtook him. He was recognised by a detective who was examining passports in the house where Larralde lodged. This man, Félix Barbier, had done his military service with the Chasseurs at Bayonne and had worked for twelve months with Larralde as clerk in the General Staff office. Larralde told his story, but Barbier wouldn’t believe him: he offered him money, but Barbier was not to be bribed. And so, rather than be balked of his revenge’ — for the first time the stern voice grew unsteady — ‘Larralde killed him. And for that murder was guillotined on the Boulevard Arago in Paris on the twenty-eighth of May!’

Deathly pale she faced him, her luminous eyes fixed in a glassy stare, her lips parted, as though a cry of anguish were frozen there.

‘Three deaths in all to your charge,’ he said, and was silent.

She made a convulsive sound in her throat.

‘And you,’ she whispered, her eyes closed in agony, ‘you?’

‘Louis Larralde was my friend,’ he answered sombrely. ‘Luis Larraga he called himself in the Legion, where we served together. When he realised that he would have to die with his mission unfulfilled, he confided it to me...’

Her long fingers clutched her throat, creamy and full.

‘And...and all the time that we were together, you...you knew this?’ she gasped.

He bowed his head in silence.

Passing her hand across her brow, ‘And now?’ she questioned.

Once more he glanced towards the door, listening.

‘Any moment now,’ he answered slowly, ‘the house will be surrounded...’

‘You intend to give me up, then?’ she said steadily. ‘You realise it means certain death. The French will have no mercy on me...’

‘Did you have mercy on my friend?’

‘At least I had no hand in his death. I knew nothing about the theft of those documents at the time. My orders were merely to ensure that Captain Larralde was away from his rooms at Bayonne on the night in question...’

‘Orders? Whose orders?’

‘The anarchist group of San Sebastian!’

‘And what had anarchists to do with you?’

She drew herself up proudly, her eyes as bright as swords.

‘I am Ramiro Leon’s daughter!’ she said.

‘But I thought your name was Santin?’

‘My mother’s name. We took it to escape publicity

when we went to Cuba for a year after my father's death. You've heard of Ramiro Leon?"

'Of course. I remember the tremendous outcry when he was executed, the protest meetings in the Latin Quarter. And he was your father?'

'I was his only child...'

'I see,' said Rex musingly.

'He was an anarchist,' she went on passionately, 'but an anarchist, as Christ was an anarchist, a man pure of heart who wanted to upset the established order to create a happier world. My father was an intellectual who abhorred violence, but because he was rich and a brilliant writer, because the people worshipped him, the Spanish Government flung him into gaol and sentenced him to death. All over the world Liberalism was up in arms. But Reaction claimed its victim. Ramiro Leon had to die...'

She stood up before him like a white-hot flame, pale and tense and vibrating.

He looked no more towards the door, watching her spellbound.

'They shot him at Montjuich,' the girl's warm voice welled out across the room. 'The night before, I was taken to the fortress to say good-bye. My governess went with me; my mother was at home in a state of collapse. When I look back, it seems to me that on that evening my childhood ended and my womanhood began. I was only fifteen, but then and there I declared war upon my country, upon this system that had slaughtered in cold blood on a trumped-up charge the kindest, noblest friend I ever had...'

'Then how could you work for the Germans?' asked Rex gently.

‘Republican France had all my sympathies until the Russian revolution,’ she answered. ‘Germany contrived the overthrow of Tsardom. I gave my services against the Allies only that Lenin and Trotsky might complete their work, that the spread of Communism might free Spain from tyranny...’

‘Yet you are conspiring against France to-day?’

‘Yes,’ she flared back, ‘because only French support in Morocco can save the Spanish monarchy...’

‘Your father was a dreamer. I’ve never heard a word against the purity of his motives. But you...’ He surveyed her sombrely. ‘You are doing this for money?’

She raised her eyes to his.

‘Do you really believe that of me?’ she asked sadly.

‘Klau said...’ he began; but the pain in her face arrested the words on his lips.

‘I’ve never had a peseta,’ she told him scornfully, ‘from the Germans or from the Rifis. And I’ve paid for every venture out of my own pocket. You couldn’t expect a creature like Klau to believe that. But I should have thought that you...’ She broke off; and he saw that her lips were trembling.

‘I can only judge you by the company you keep,’ he gave her back with a sort of passionate indignation. ‘You say that your father abhorred violence. Yet I find you associating with jackals like Voinik or that drunken German ruffian. Do you think you honour your father’s memory by consorting with a gang like this?’

She sighed.

‘We all forge the chains that bind us,’ she said. ‘Man is the slave of his actions. Who knows but that

I've sometimes thought as you do?' She looked wistfully away.

'You were your own mistress: you had money. Surely if you'd wanted to, you could have broken away from it all?'

She shook her head.

'No,' she said. 'I was caught fast. There was no turning back...'

'But why not?'

She looked at him; and he saw that her eyes were shadowed with fear.

'Don Leandro...'

'You mean he would have denounced you?' Then, seeing that she did not speak, he added: 'But you dominated him. He deferred to you in everything...'

'Because I controlled the money,' she replied, and paused. 'I never felt strong enough to defy him,' she went on rather breathlessly, 'until I met you. When I told you I'd go away with you after this business was finished, I meant it, Riccy.'

A great silence fell between them. Then he went over to the door and opened it.

'Go!' he said. 'I cannot be your judge!'

She raised her startled face and glanced across to where he stood with bowed head, a rigid figure in his sodden clothes.

'You mean'—her awed whisper rustled like paper in the quiet room—'you mean that I'm free!'

The next moment she stood before him and her trembling hands were on his shoulders. Her eyes shone like stars and her pallid face was transfigured with a sort of radiance.

‘Then it was not all sham,’ she murmured. ‘You did care . . . a little?’

Even as he raised his head to meet her glance, a distant scream rent the stillness of the old house.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE FALL OF USOTEGIA

HE lifted his head sharply, his eyes alight with sudden suspicion.

‘What was that?’ he demanded in a sibilant whisper.

With a startled face Inocencia had crept to the door and was staring into the dim kitchen. He went over and shook her arm.

‘Did you hear that? Some one screamed...’

She turned a look of blank fear upon him. ‘Leandro must have returned. As the door was shut he could have passed through the kitchen without our hearing him...’ She stopped. ‘Riccy,’ she said, ‘your wife...’

‘*My wife?*’ he repeated. ‘My wife left for Paris hours ago...’

She shook her head and with a movement of the eyes indicated the upper floors.

‘What are you trying to tell me?’ he demanded, suddenly fierce.

‘She’s... upstairs!’ she faltered.

The last syllable died away in her throat; for out of the dead hush, from somewhere shut away in the remoteness of that ancient house, a voice, shrilling upward in a very frenzy of terror, had cried out his name.

‘God!’ he shouted; and as she made a movement as though to stay with him, his arm swept her from his path. Her voice rang out warningly in his ears as, in a bound, he cleared the threshold of the kitchen. Another scream, and yet another, reverberated through the house; and a muffled thud, followed by a grinding, scraping

noise, as of furniture being dragged across the floor, was audible overhead.

He had reached the foot of the staircase in his stride, when the woodwork trembled under a heavy footfall, and round the turn of the wall, where the stair curved upward, a clumsy shape came plunging down. It was the servant, Pedro. Rex could see the pendulous cheeks, velvety with bluish stubble, shaking with his haste.

On catching sight of Rex, the man flung wide his arms to bar his advance, while out of the darkness above, scream on scream shattered the silence. The two collided violently and clinched, the Spaniard seeking to pinion the other, Rex doing his best to fight him off. The Spaniard had the advantage of the stairs, and endeavoured to bear the other down with his weight. Rex stemmed himself against the wall to jerk himself free; but his foot slipped on the polished stairway, and he and the servant slithered to the bottom of the flight, rolling over and over in their fall.

Rex landed uppermost. The distant screams persisted, but they were fainter now and, as it seemed to Rex in his desperation, more agonised. His only thought was to shake off his assailant and mount the stairs. But as he rose to his feet, Pedro grasped him by the ankle and brought him down again.

He pitched headlong, striking heavily with his shoulder against some solid piece of furniture. With a fearful din of breaking crockery and shattered glass the room was plunged into obscurity. He saw a long tongue of flame shoot along the floor and realised that he had collided with the dresser and brought down, amid a shower of cups and plates, the lamp that had stood there.

But now Pedro flung himself forward with great hands

that clawed at his opponent's throat. Rex, though half-stunned by his fall, rolled over on his back and, as the man came at him, jabbed blindly upwards with his fist. His knuckles tingled as they struck something solid; the Spaniard checked and grunted; then Rex, swinging himself by sheer muscular effort to his knees, smashed his right home again into the flabby face.

He was dimly aware that the room was lurid with a strange and trembling light, astir, too, with an unfamiliar crackling sound that his senses did not identify, as he butted the lurching form aside and rose unsteadily to his feet. Even as he did so, there came a vivid burst of orange flame and a terrific explosion that momentarily deafened him. He stopped short and saw between him and the staircase a stocky figure in a cloth cap that faced him with a levelled pistol, about which a wisp of blue smoke was wreathed.

The screams had died away, and their abrupt cessation seemed to drive Rex frantic. Something solid was under his hands, and quicker than the realisation of his critical danger, as he stood there covered by the pointed pistol, he raised up this missile which chance had put in his grasp — he knew only as it left his hands that it was an oaken chair — and slung it blindly across the room. His ears sang with the roar of a second report and the stench of burnt cordite was sour in his nostrils as, across a floor that was, of a sudden, unaccountably, a sea of eager flames, he leaped for the stairs, careless that the pistol might speak again, conscious of nothing save that he was unwounded still and that the way lay free.

But no shot followed, and he gained the floor above unscathed. The landing was gloomy and deserted, the

corridor a vista of blank doors shut on silent rooms. As he paused, seeking to guide himself by any sound that might strike his ear, he sniffed the odour of burning and saw, without curiosity, how little tendrils of smoke came curling up the stairs.

A faint rustle overhead stiffened him into instant vigilance. He realised he must go cautiously now; the upper floor, for all he knew, might be seething with the gang. Gingerly, step by step, setting his feet on the sides of the treads lest a creaking board might betray him, he began to climb the stairs.

The second landing was as dim and still as the first. A sort of greyish reflection in the night sky filtering through the dingy lantern that surmounted the well of the staircase showed the mouth of the corridor stretching on either hand. Noiseless in his rubber-shod shoes he stole across the landing... and came face to face with Don Leandro.

Snouting like a rat, the old man waited there, his domed head bent forward and cocked to one side, while he gnawed nervously at a yellow forefinger thrust into his mouth. Down his cheek, colourless as lead in the dimness, a raw and bleeding scratch ran from eye to the curve of the jaw.

The sight of that fresh wound told its own tale. With an incoherent shout of rage, Rex sprang forward. But Leandro had paused only long enough for the recognition to be mutual, and in a flash had scuttled like a rat through a door that stood ajar at his elbow. Rex heard the door slam and on that a heavy bumping sound, followed by a low moan which rose to a shriek of fear. Then he flung himself madly at the door.

Some object blocked it as he drove savagely at it with

his shoulder. The door gave a little and he got the upper part of his arm through. As he thrust and thrust to widen the gap, the thought came into his mind that if this man had a gun his fate was probably sealed. In his fit of Berserker fury he was not afraid of death; but he remembered that Sally was in that room, defending herself with her bare hands against that livid creature, and he knew that he must live to bring her into safety...

Something that spat savagely as, with a thud like a blow from a hatchet, it struck the door-jamb beside him and a reverberating roar that streaked the darkness with flame, told him that Leandro had opened fire. Rex ducked swiftly and shoved desperately at the door. Now the gap widened and he found himself within the darkened room, amid a barricade of furniture, peering out at a wizened figure vaguely silhouetted against the open window.

Then an astonishing thing happened. A dull report echoed from the blackness without and a shower of glass tinkled upon the floor. He saw the stunted form in the window glance round and stagger hastily back into the room. That gave Rex his chance. He slid out swiftly from behind the barricade, and springing forward and upward from the crouch, like a sprinter at the starter's pistol, leapt upon that dim shape.

His bound swept the pair of them clear across the threshold of the window, and brought them thudding against the railing of the balcony. Rex felt the frail planking rock beneath their feet and the balustrade jar to their weight. The old man was tough as steel and, that first swift onrush spent, drove his sinewy arms upward and outward to free himself, if he could, from his assailant's grip. His right hand still clutched the

pistol and Rex had to put out all his strength to keep the barrel pointing to the ground.

They were fighting for the pistol now. Inch by inch the old man's hand, with sinews tough and tense, was jerking upwards, twisting the pistol towards Rex's thigh. Rex had only his left hand with which to meet the danger, for with his right he was fighting off writhing, bony fingers that strove to reach his throat. The high wind raged about them as they swayed to and fro upon the quivering balcony.

Even as he fought for his life, Rex strained his ears for any sound from the room behind. He could not imagine what had happened to Sally. He had heard her voice cry out in fear from the other side of the door; yet she was nowhere to be seen when he had burst his way into the room. He grew hot with fear at the thought of her in that confined space with the old man firing wildly at the door...

His desperate anxiety about her momentarily distracted his attention and he must have relaxed his grip. Suddenly he felt the relentless pressure on his left arm increase. The strain was unbearable. The pistol was moving steadily up, upward and inward...

He was blinded and deafened and shaken by the roar of the discharge so that he was scarcely conscious of the scorching blast that burnt his leg like a naked flame. The shock of the explosion jerked him from Leandro's grasp and for a fleeting second his right hand was free. Instantly he drove it, fingers outspread, at the skinny throat, bending the slight wiry frame backwards against the rail. He felt the body stiffly arch beneath him; there was a sudden rending noise; and he stepped swiftly back as a whole section of the balustrade broke away

and with a gurgling shriek and a hand that clawed at the empty air the old man toppled over into the night.

Rex propped himself against the window. He was suddenly aware that his face was wet and, putting up his hand, found that the perspiration was pouring into his eyes. His leg pained him and, clapping his hand to his thigh, he found scraps of charred cloth adhering to his fingers. The bullet appeared to have missed him; but the flame had scorched through his trousers to the skin. The reek of smouldering cloth was strangely strong in the air...

He peered over the broken rail. The night had swallowed all traces of Don Leandro. Rex suddenly thought of the shot that had shattered the window-pane. It had been fired from outside: did that mean that the police had arrived? In that case there should be lights, the sound of voices, on the beach. But all was still below, except for the beating of the waves upon the shore.

He turned to glance along the balcony and saw Sally. She lay in a crumpled heap, her golden head drooping on her shoulder, past the breach in the balustrade, at the extreme end of the balcony. For the moment Rex was powerless with horror; for it seemed to him that she must be dead. But, as he dropped on his knees at her side, she stirred and moaned.

When he carried her into the room he noticed that the bed had been stripped of its coverings and that the sheets trailed on the floor. A closer look showed him that they were knotted together and he realised that Don Leandro had been preparing to escape.

As he set the limp form down upon the bare mattress, Sally opened her eyes and clutched his arm. 'Don't

leave me,' she pleaded faintly. 'There was a shot, wasn't there? I've been so frightened.'

He warmed her dank hand in his. 'You needn't be frightened now,' he said soothingly; but his anxious gaze kept travelling to the door.

Abruptly she sat up, one hand pressed against her cheek.

'Where... where is he?' she asked in a scared voice.

'Where he'll do no more harm,' Rex answered soberly.

She was contemplating him with a dazed expression.

'You... you shot him?' she asked unsteadily.

He shook his head. 'The railing of the balcony gave way when we were struggling...'

She shuddered. Rex remarked that her colour was coming back.

'I thought I should die of fright,' she said. 'When it grew dark, I barricaded the door; but he burst his way in. I ran out on the balcony to escape him, but he followed me out. Then he got his arms round me and tried to drag me back into the room. He kept calling me "little darling," and pawing me with his hateful clawlike hands. It was horrible! I fought and fought. Then there were suddenly shots in the house and he left me and went away. I thought he'd gone for good. But he came back and... and I don't remember anything after that until there was a shot, two shots, here in the room just now...'

Rex laid his face against hers. 'Don't think about it any more,' he said. 'You're quite safe with me, darling. But we've got to get out of this. Do you think you're strong enough to walk...?'

She nodded soberly. 'I'm all right now. I'm ashamed of being such a weak wretch.' She swung her feet to

the ground, then remained suddenly still, her head in the air. 'Rex,' she cried suddenly, 'what's that noise?'

He stood up. 'It's only the wind...'

'No, but listen!'

Then he heard it, a sort of muffled roar, deeper than the noise of the wind, like air being driven through a ventilator, accompanied by a curious, sharp crackling.

'It sounds like fire,' she said.

Swiftly he opened the door. Instantly a little puff of turgid, yellow smoke buffeted his face. Beyond the door the corridor was lit by a flickering, crimson light. As he sprang back into the room he stripped off his jacket.

'Quick,' he cried, 'wrap this round your head!' He was surprised to see how calm she was. She asked no questions, but did as he bade her while he bound his handkerchief across his mouth and nose.

'Now...!'

Hand-in-hand they plunged out into the smoke of the corridor...

Tongues of scarlet flame, leaping man-high from the blazing staircase and darting, like lizards in the sun, across the shrivelling woodwork beneath their feet, met them on the landing. They had left the door behind them open and, swept by the draught from the window, the corridor was a funnel of stifling smoke, fanned by a blast of heat that seared eyes and face like a sheet of white-hot metal. Behind them the house was bathed in a bright orange glare and the air seemed to vibrate with the eager licking of the flames.

Fire and smoke pursued them down the passage and, when they had reached the room again and shut the door, smoke stole after them through every cranny. Rex

snatched up the sheets from the floor and darted out upon the balcony. He shrugged his shoulders helplessly as he glanced over the shattered rail, then made his way swiftly to the end. After a downward glance he dropped to his knees and began to knot one end of the rope of sheets to the iron support of the balcony. He tugged at the knot to test it, then rose to his feet and faced Sally with troubled eyes.

‘You’ll want all your nerve, Sally darling,’ he told her. ‘I wish there were some other way, but it’s our only chance. And not much of a chance at that...’

‘Tell me!’ she bade him simply.

He laid his hand on the side of the house. ‘Underneath the balcony, flush with the façade, is a high wall, the wall of the handball court. We’ve got to let ourselves down to it. From there we shall have to scramble somehow to the floor of the court...’

‘Is it...is it far to drop?’ she asked with a gulp.

‘From the balcony only about fifteen feet; but it’s tricky. We shall have to swing in to the wall. I’m going to lower you. It won’t be too bad if you don’t look down. That wall, you see, is on the very edge of the cliff. There seems to be a flattish place to land just where the wall joins the house, and you can steady yourself by that stanchion which carries the wire netting. Look!’

She craned her neck over the balustrade. It was a warm and blowy night and the balcony seemed to give to every gust of wind. All the coast at their feet was bare and bright in the glare of the burning house. In the fitful reflection of the flames, through a drifting pall of black smoke, she could see the cliffs glowing rosily, the rocks blood-red, and beyond them the sea darkly

shining with an oily gleam. The lower part of the house, now blazing from wall to wall, seemed to be pouring down a cascade of fire that flung shadows far across the beach. Over all, the moon rode coldly in a high, dark sky flecked with wisps of silvery cloud. Against the lurid background the fronton wall below, with its jagged coping sloping upward to a peak, was like a thin, black thread. Here and there, on the inner side, the greyness of the stonework appeared in the reddish glare which illuminated the court behind.

Now all the balcony was wreathed in whirling smoke, and even in the freshness of the night the heat smote fiercely on their faces. Rex picked up the free end of the sheets and made a running knot about the girl's body.

'When you feel your feet,' he told her, 'grab hold of that stanchion and hang on like grim death until I land beside you. That wall's none too safe.' He took her in his arms. 'There was so much I had to tell you, but there's no time now. God be with you, my brave darling! I can't bear the thought of losing you again...'

She leaned back, looking into his eyes, her small hand resting on the great knot that lay between her breasts.

'And...her?' she whispered.

'Oh, Sally,' he said brokenly, 'there was never anyone but you...'

Spontaneously she gave him her lips.

'I've no fear now,' she told him softly, 'I'm ready, Rex...'

He helped her over the balustrade and his lips rested for an instant on her hair as she stood there waiting. Then, bracing himself against the wall, steadily, hand

over hand, he began to lower her down. Through the smoke that almost blinded him now, he saw her slight form swaying about the dark line of the wall, then her hand went out to the stanchion, the pressure on the rope relaxed and he knew that she was safe. Already the smoke belching forth from the room they had quitted was tinged with scarlet and, with a jangle of breaking glass, a livid mass of flame burst from the shutter at his back as he swung himself over the rail and down the rope into the crimson void.

The wind slung him to and fro as he dangled in space. The balcony seemed to bend forward beneath his weight and the sensation sickened him. When he ventured to glance above his head, he saw the flames running along the flooring of the balcony and he wondered grimly how long the knot would hold...

Then something touched his foot; a hand was on his leg to guide him; and Sally drew him on to the narrow coping of the fronton wall. With a desperate face she clung to a rusty strut from which a screen of netting followed the gentle slope of the wall to its peak and thence descended on the other side.

Beneath their feet the old wall, spilling its stones and rubble, like a tree shedding its leaves in the fall of the year, quivered under the savage buffetings of the wind, which blew across it great billows of inky smoke spangled with sparks. Below them the fronton was bright as day. The green gates, the abandoned chaise, and the other rubbish ranged along one side of the court, were clearly revealed. The heat was terrific, for the house was blazing like a torch. The brickwork cracked and sizzled and flames flared out of the roof. Through the charred embrasure of the kitchen window, jet-black

in the yellow light, they had a glimpse of a shimmering curtain of fire.

‘We must go on,’ said Rex. ‘The roof will fall in directly and that’ll bring the whole place about our ears. We must go on, Sally darling. Hang on to the netting and don’t look down!’

‘It’s no good,’ she faltered, ‘I daren’t move. I’m terrified...’

‘We can’t stay here,’ he told her. ‘Follow me! I’ll show you the way...’

On all fours he began to crawl along the top of the wall, clinging to the screen of netting. Where the coping, which ran up to a sharp edge, had not crumbled away, he tore out the stones from the loosened mortar to make place for their knees and hands. Thus they had a ledge about a foot in breadth along which to make their way.

The wall swayed perilously as, half-blinded by smoke and stung by sparks, they topped the peak and began to slither down on the other side. Rex shouted something to Sally, who was close behind him, pointing down across the outer wall to the cliff. The wind carried his voice away, but she saw lights moving and heard, above the roaring of the flames, shouting in the yard without.

They could walk erect now, for the top of the wall ran level again. A few paces brought them to the outer wall of the enclosure. Below them the cliff was all in a tumult with the glare of headlights and people running. They were dragging a ladder to the wall. Now it was set up. A familiar voice cried: ‘Sally!’ and there was Rupert, his face creased into a thousand joyful wrinkles, holding out his arms to her at the top. Behind him she had a glimpse of the cherubic features of Inspector Barbier.

Rex was just handing her to the ladder when an agonised scream from the fronton made them both swing round.

Clearly visible in the lurid light, Inocencia stood under the playing wall. Behind her the mouth of the secret passage gaped black in the stonework. She was gazing upward, in a rapt and horrified posture, her hands clasped before her as in prayer, at the immense column of smoke and flame that was shooting aloft through the column of the Pigeon House. Even as that wild cry resounded, the mounting flames appeared to take a last leap skyward, and with a mighty, rending noise of rafters snapping, the old house settled into a fiery heap.

Inocencia started back, and at that moment the fronton wall seemed to dip forward from the centre. Then in a swelling pillar of dust that sprang rumbling from the ground, it crashed down and hid that lonely figure from their sight.

CHAPTER XXVIII

‘LOVE IS UNDERSTANDING’

IN the dingy little sitting-room of her hotel Sally sat and waited for Rex. It was long past midnight, and twice already the night porter had poked a sleepy head in at the door to see if he could switch off the lights. But Sally would not go to bed. On coming in she had merely bathed her smoke-stained face and hands and changed her blackened and spark-scorched frock for a wrapper.

Rupert was with her. Whilst they waited he described to her the sequence of events since their parting at noonday. From Rupert she learnt of the existence of the gang, of Doña Inocencia's rôle at its head, and of the nature of the mission which had taken Rex away, just as Rupert had had it from his friend. For, by a piece of luck which would have appeared incredible except in a place as small as Saint-Jean-de-Luz, the very first person whom Rex encountered on swimming ashore from the yacht had been Rupert. That happened in this way.

On returning from the Pigeon House, Rupert, as Sally had surmised, was informed at the hotel that she had started for Paris without him. Thereupon, as he had been told at the Pigeon House that he could see Rex there next day, he decided to spend the night at Saint-Jean-de-Luz and go out to Usotegia in the morning. He was taking a stroll in the dark town by the harbour, deserted at that hour, before turning in, when, to his boundless

amazement, he blundered into Rex, ‘drippin’ like a water-spaniel,’ as Rupert put it.

Rex told him briefly the story of the conspiracy; how, in the guise of Forsan, he had been carried off on the previous night to the Aurora, and how, the gang having whiled away their day of forced inaction on board by getting heavily intoxicated, he had availed himself of their condition to burst through a panel of the door of the cabin where he was confined and escape. He had let himself down by the anchor chains into the sea and, after a fierce buffeting in the waves, had managed to land on the rocks at the foot of the breakwater. When Rupert met him he had been on his way to the police station to try and get into touch with Inspector Barbier.

Rupert guided Rex to the detective’s hotel, and on the way told his story. Rex seemed amazed and also rather perturbed to learn that the girl from Valia’s was Sally, and much relieved to hear from Rupert that she had started back for Paris. But he became highly excited on discovering that his friend had disclosed Sally’s real identity to Doña Inocencia, for, as he pointed out, Sally had been seen in the detective’s company and the whole gang would immediately take alarm.

The detective was still absent from his hotel, and on this Rex decided to go off to the Pigeon House at once, leaving Rupert to wait for Barbier. There was little risk, Rex said, for there would be nobody at the house but Inocencia with the servants, Catarina and Jean. Don Leandro, with Pedro and Hertz, had come out to the Aurora during the afternoon and was still on board. As he slipped away, Rex said, he had heard the old man’s snarling voice engaged in hot argument with the others, who were apparently objecting to a proposal to

take the prisoner ashore. Rupert was to communicate the facts to Barbier and have him organise an immediate raid on the Aurora, and at the same time dispatch a second party to surround the Pigeon House. Rex, in the meantime, would take care that Inocencia, as the ring-leader, did not escape.

When the detective ultimately appeared (Rupert said), there was an unavoidable delay while the formalities of the law were complied with, for which purpose Barbier carried him off to the police station. While the detective was at the telephone, the local police commissary produced a message which had come in that evening from Ciboure, reporting the discovery of a Talbot car, apparently abandoned, on the roadside near Socoa Fort. On that, Barbier had cast red tape to the winds. Leaving the local commissary to conduct the raid on the yacht, he had jumped into a car with Rupert and two policemen and set off instantly for Usotegia. They had arrived to find the place in flames...

Sally listened with a distracted ear to Rupert's rather rambling narrative. He had expected her to reproach him with his indiscretion of the morning, but she made no remark. Her thoughts kept recurring to the slight figure, all smeared with dust, and strangely limp, which, just before Rupert had taken her away, they had seen extricated from the ruins of the wall. A doctor was sent for in haste, and in the meantime Rex had insisted that Sally should let Rupert escort her to the hotel. He promised to follow after, as soon as he had made his statement to the police. He had looked so worn and ill that Sally had forbore to question him. But he had answered her unspoken query. Doña Inocencia was still breathing, he said; and on that, with a white face,

he had hurried away to Barbier, who was calling him.

Two o'clock had clanged out across the night from the belfry of the old church of Saint Jean before Rex appeared. Sally and Rupert were sitting in silence when the sitting-room door slowly opened. An almost unrecognisable figure stood disclosed in the brightness of the electric light. Haggard, unkempt, unshaven, his face a mass of black smears, his flannel suit rent and powdered with dust, Rex limped painfully into the room.

Rupert tossed aside the newspaper he had been reading and sprang up.

‘Lord! you look all in!’ he exclaimed. ‘Here, let me get you a drink, old boy...’

With a weary gesture Rex stayed him. ‘I don’t want anything. I had some brandy at the police station.’ He looked dully at Sally. ‘You shouldn’t have waited up. I thought you’d have been in bed and asleep hours ago...’ His voice was hoarse with fatigue.

‘Don’t worry about me,’ said Sally. ‘I shouldn’t have slept a wink anyway until I knew you were back. You look absolutely finished, you poor thing. You’d better have a bath at once and get some sleep...’

‘Sleep...?’ He repeated the word softly; and laughed.

‘That Barbier man must be an absolute brute to have kept him up in this state,’ Sally remarked in an undertone to Rupert.

Rex overheard her. ‘Barbier’s all right,’ he put in. ‘I had to go with him to the police station to identify the prisoners...’

‘They’ve got ’em, then?’ asked Rupert joyfully.

Rex nodded absently.

‘The whole bunch, except the two Basques and Hertz; and there are some charred remains in the house which the police think may be Pedro’s. Apparently petrol was stored in the kitchen, and one of Hertz’s bullets must have perforated a can after I’d knocked over the lamp. That’s why the house burned so quickly — that and the high wind. They found Don Leandro’s body on the rocks. They’ve cleaned up the gang properly; papers, forged money, even the printed proclamations — everything is in the hands of the police. Barbier’s thrilled to the bone. The confrontation was devilish amusing. Grolle — that’s one of the German’s, a nasty fellow — was frightfully indignant. God, it was funny!’

He threw back his head and gave a harsh and bitter laugh that was like a gasp for breath. Sally, who was watching him quietly from her armchair, glanced at Rupert, who nodded understandingly and stole away.

Rex was silent for a spell, staring moodily in front of him. At last he said with an effort:

‘There’s something you should know, Sally. When I was forcing my way into that room where you were and Don Leandro was firing at me, a bullet, coming from outside, smashed the window beside him. It threw him off his balance and gave me my chance to rush him. It can only have been Doña Inocencia who fired that shot. We found on her a revolver with one chamber discharged. She must have seen Don Leandro on the balcony from the beach and fired up at him. Afterwards, when she saw the house in flames, she came back through the secret passage to our rescue. She died without knowing that her shot had saved our lives...’

‘Dead?’ Sally whispered. ‘Oh, Rex...’

He nodded, frowning. His clenched hand opened

and Sally heard his ring rattle on the wood as the hand dropped limply on the table. ‘She died before the doctor came: without regaining consciousness.’

He sank down into a chair.

‘Gosh, I’m tired!’ he murmured brokenly, and was silent.

Then Sally spoke: ‘Rex!’ she said softly, and opened her arms to him.

At the sound of her voice he looked up wildly and, when he saw the kindness of her eyes, fell forward on his knees and bowed his head in her lap.

‘Tell me!’ was all she said.

With his head pillowed on her breast and her arms about him, he told her the whole story of the tracking-down of Doña Inocencia.

‘There were two women in her,’ he said when his tale of temptation was done; ‘one that was hateful and one that compelled love. In her softer moods this charm of hers was indescribable, so strong as to be almost tangible, a part of her, like...like her face or hands. And it might have been a sixth sense, she used it so unconsciously. When I was with her I used to feel it like a magnet drawing me; but at a distance, like a magnet its power diminished. I know now that her charm was bound up in her vital personality, in her eyes, perhaps, or that magical voice of hers; for to-night, just now, when I saw her bruised and broken, dead, I discovered that it had flickered out with her life. I realised then, as I had realised when she asked me to go away with her, and, more strongly still, when your cry for help broke in upon our last meeting in this world, that I’ve loved only one woman in my life, and

that's you. And I knew then that what I'd felt for Inocencia wasn't love, but pity, profound, anguishing pity. She never had a chance, Sally, darling...'

Sally nodded reflectively.

'She loved you, Rex. Her death proves that. She must have been desperately unhappy at the end. A woman knows that pity isn't love...'

'What is love?' said Rex, looking up.

'Love is understanding,' she answered gently; and laid her face against the bristling, grimy cheek.

He sighed and closed his eyes. A long silence fell upon the little room. The first morning greyness was filtering through the blinds, and on the boulevard outside the heavy peasant carts were rattling to market. With soothing fingers and dreamy eyes Sally began to stroke the tousled, black hair that lay against her breast. Presently she glanced down and saw that he had fallen asleep. She drew aside and made him comfortable in the armchair, then, pulling up another chair beside it, sat down, with tender eyes, to watch over him while he slumbered...

A week later Rex and Sally sat at dinner in the sitting-room of Marcia Greer's pink suite in the big Paris hotel. An hour before, Rex, detained by the investigation into the conspiracy, which the military had now taken over, had arrived from Saint-Jean-de-Luz; Sally had come up with Rupert by car on the morning after the fire.

Dinner was over and the waiter, having served the coffee, had retired. Beside them, the long windows, thrown open on the close July night, gave a sidelong glimpse of the festooned lights of the Champs Elysées;

and from the terrace below ascended the pleasantly muted strains of the orchestra playing in the restaurant.

‘Then you don’t think you’ll have to go back?’ said Sally, passing Rex his coffee.

‘No. We can get off to the cottage to-morrow as we planned. And once you and I are in the Esterel together’ — his eyes rested tenderly on her radiant face — ‘wild horses won’t drag me away. But there’s really no reason why they should want me any more, at any rate for the present. I’ve told them all I mean to say. It will be months before the gang is brought to trial. The investigation is likely to be a long business. They haven’t found out yet where Hossein ou Moha was hidden before he was brought to the Pigeon House, somewhere at Biarritz, probably; and they’re trying to locate the press where this forged Moroccan money, and the handbills in Arabic, were printed. It’s obviously in Spain, at San Sebastian, most likely; handy to the French frontier, anyway: the military people seem to think that’s why the Pigeon House was chosen as headquarters; for that, and because it had a convenient means of secret communication with the yacht. Have you seen anything of Barbier since he came back?’

‘He rang up just before you arrived. He’s going to telephone again in the morning...’

Rex shook his head and stuck his cigar into his mouth at a defiant angle.

‘He’s a good chap,’ he observed, ‘but he’s wasting his time...’

‘You’re determined not to tell him, then?’

Rex nodded. His face was stern. ‘The real identity of Pedro Gomez remains a secret between you and me, Sally...’

She smiled at him affectionately.

‘What a staunch friend you are!’

He gave her back her smile.

‘We were brother Basques,’ he answered as though that explained it. ‘Tell me, Sally, darling,’ he went on, leaning towards her, ‘do you think I was right to leave you to answer his call?’

She looked away rather wistfully.

‘No woman in love could answer that question fairly,’ she said. She turned her head and gazed at him intently. ‘Rex, what were you going to tell me about yourself that night? Was it that you were born a Basque?’

‘Yes,’ he replied soberly. ‘That, and something else. Until I came back from the war I believed what my mother told me when, as a kid of eleven, I left her to go to England, that I had been adopted by a wealthy and charitable Englishman. I never saw this man, and I was never able even to find out his name; but I am virtually certain now’ — his voice deepened — ‘that he was my father...’ He glanced at her quickly: ‘I’m illegitimate, Sally...’

She took his hand. ‘You know that makes no difference to me...’

His eyes thanked her. ‘It hit me hard when I discovered it. You see, he died suddenly and left me stranded, without money, without even a name of my own. It sickened me of life for a bit. That’s really why I joined the Legion. But I want to tell you. My mother...’

‘No!’ she said.

‘But you ought to know,’ he objected. ‘People may say things one day...’

‘What do people matter to us? I take you as you

took me, my dear, not for what you have, but for what you are . . .’

He went round behind her chair and kissed the V-shaped point of her close-cropped golden hair.

‘You’re a darling,’ he said. ‘But I’m perfectly certain that Marcia wouldn’t agree with you . . .’

She laughed caressingly and, snuggling to him, planted a kiss on the point of his chin. Then, glancing up at him: ‘Oh, Rex,’ she exclaimed, ‘that reminds me. I had a letter from Marcia to-day. She wants us to go and stop with her at Vichy . . .’

His face fell. ‘Instead of going down to the cottage? Sally, I flatly refuse to share you with anybody . . .’

‘You won’t have to. I wired back to Marcia: *Sorry. Eloping with my husband.* But I’ve written and told her that we’ll stay with her later. She’s a dear, Rex, and she said some very nice things about you in her letter. Wait, I’ll get it; it’s in the bedroom . . .’

He slid his arms about her as she rose from the table, her silver frock all shimmering in the light.

‘You’re looking perfectly lovely,’ he whispered. He stepped back and surveyed her. ‘And, oh, Sally, you’re wearing the dress you had on that night at the villa . . .’

Her lips parted in a dreamy, mysterious smile.

‘Isn’t it our wedding night still?’ she said and crossed to the bedroom.

When she was gone he pushed aside the table and stepped out upon the balcony. Between the myriad lights of the avenue the cars whizzed up and down. From below ascended the murmur of voices and soft music. In the restaurant the band was playing a slow

and plaintive melody that seemed to strike a responsive chord in his memory. He listened; and the air came back to him.

He seemed to hear again the guitars ringing under the tamarisks of the Paseo de la Concha and a voice, a little husky, but sweet and true, singing to the throb of the strings:

*Asomate á la ventana,
Ay, ay, ay,
Paloma del alma mia!*

Of a sudden the curving bow of lights was blurred before his eyes. There was a light step behind him, and Sally, radiant as the evening star in her silver dress, was at his side. Desperately he caught her to him; and Marcia's letter fell unheeded to the floor...

THE END

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